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THREE RECRUITS

AND

THE GIRLS THEY LEFT BEHIND THEM.

VOL. II.

THREE RECRUITS

AND

THE GIRLS THEY LEFT BEHIND THEM

A Novel

BY

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&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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THREE RECRUITS.

CHAPTER V.

THE SHADOW UPON MARY KIRK'S YOUNG LIFE.

The joys of parents are secret, and so are their griefs and fears ; they cannot utter the one, nor they will not utter the other. Children sweeten labour, but they make misfortune more bitter ; they increase the cares of life, but they mitigate the remembrance of death.

LORD BACON.

FARMER KIRK was waiting with his gig at the corner of the road (near the spot where Mr. Scruton was robbed) to meet the coach which was to bring Miss

Hardwick from Chesterfield on a visit to the Home Farm.

It was a delicious September day, the end of the month. Gleaners were in the wheat-fields, and children were nutting in the hedgerows, which were just beginning to show autumn tints, against which the periwinkle disported its blue flowers. Where Mr. Kirk had drawn up his gig, you could hear the music of the narrow rivulet, which had its rise in a bubbling spring at Grassmoor, in the road close to the Farm. A squirrel hopped from one tree to another over the farmer's head, and a fox presently came out of the hedge, away up the road, and stood looking at him. The green grass carpeted the sides of the highway for miles, except here and there, where some old parishioner sat upon a heap of stones, earning his humble livelihood. Presently the sound of a horn

aroused the farmer, and by-and-by a coach pulled up at the cross-roads, the horses pawing the earth as if impatient at being stopped just as they were in the full steady swing of a business-like canter; for Grassmoor itself (which could be seen from the highway half buried in trees) was only three miles from Chesterfield.

The merry guard, with a china-aster in the button-hole of his velvet jacket, handed Miss Hardwick out of the coach; Mr. Kirk carried her box, and both of them helped her into the gig, receiving for their gallantry a smile which showed Susan's white teeth, and lighted up her dark eyes. The outside passengers looked the happier for gazing on the pretty young lady. The coachman saluted with his whip; a gay young outsider in a foppish coat, with the collar high up in his neck, took off his hat; and, with a "so-ho" and

"Now, my beauties," away went the coach one way, and away went Mr. Kirk's gig the other.

"And how is Mary?" asked Susan, when she had settled herself comfortably at the farmer's side, and his bay nag was striding along, and lifting the dust so that it left a white cloud behind them.

"Oh, she's a deal better, the lass is; though she's quiet and mopish," he said.

"Does she know of all that has happened?"

"Well, yes, I towd her mysen. She suspected it all along; she heard the jury say 'guilty,' and, after I come back from London, trying to get sentence altered, she knowed as I'd done no good, else I should have said so. Days and weeks went on, and she was just like a ghost going about,

doing nothing, and saying nothing, and doctor said if we didna mind she'd lose her senses. I was for telling her all, and letting her seek comfort in prayers, and going to church, which does seem a kind of comfort in trouble, especially to women. But my poor missus would not hear of it, and the children was kept from her, for fear they'd say summat; and it was a miserable business altogether."

"Indeed it must have been. Poor Mary!" said Susan.

"So one day, when the missus had gone to Chesterfield market, and the children were all in the fields, I says to Mary, 'Come here, love;' she wa' sitting by the kitchen window, leaning her face on her hand, and looking out into the garden; 'come here,' I says, 'and sit on my knee. I want to tell thee summat.' She came,

bless her heart, and I laid her head on my shoulder, and I says, ‘We aren’t doing right by you, Mary; we are treating you as if you was a sort of visitor, instead of a daughter that we love, a daughter and a friend,’ I says, ‘that should have no secrets from one another. Now I want you to listen to me. You’ve got a father and mother that loves you; you’ve gotten brothers and sisters as would think nowt a trouble to make you happy; you’ve got a comfortable home; you want for nothing. Isn’t that so?’ I says. ‘Yes, father,’ she answered; ‘And yet,’ I says, ‘you have got a sorrow as you wonnat let us share wi’ you, and we are not doing right by you,’ I says, ‘to let you go on keeping it to yourself, and the doctor says we’ll lose you, if we donnat mind; and that would just clean break our hearts,’ I says; and so it would, Miss Hardwick.”

Susan had already forgotten her own troubles, in her sympathy for Kirk and his daughter.

“‘ Dear father,’ she says,” continued the farmer, “kissing me, and bursting into tears, the first I had seen in her eyes since that cold-blooded juryman said ‘ guilty,’ ‘dear father,’ she says, ‘ tell me what to do;’ and it were the first time in my life as I were glad to see a lass cry, let alone my own child; so I let her go on a bit, and then I says, ‘ Will you try to obey me, loving-like and dutiful, as a child should obey a father who’d die for her?’ For so I would, Miss Hardwick !”

There were tears in old Kirk’s eyes as he turned his face towards Susan.

“ So I would,” he went on, “and she says, ‘ Father, tell me what you wish ; I am your child ; I will do it.’ I didn’t tell her exactly in direct words as the law had

murdered Jacob Marks, but I says, ‘ Well, Mary, my dear, it’s our duty to be resigned, whatever God wills, and He has willed that Jacob Marks should die ; ’ she clutched my arm, but said nothing, ‘ and the poor lad has gone to his rest ; ’ she buried her face in my neck ; ‘ and some day we must all go, and,’ I says, ‘ we’ve got to bear it ; and I want you to bend to the will of God, and not forget as that poor dear fellow, heaven rest him, was not the only person in the world ; there’s me and your mother,’ I says, ‘ and the children,’ I says, ‘ and Miss Hardwick,’ I says ; ‘ and we want you to live for us, and be a comfort and a blessing to us,’ I says ; and she looked up, with her face all wet, bless her, and she says, ‘ I will, father, I will ; ’ and then we went out together in the garden, and walked about, and she asked me to write and beg of you to

come and see us, and, as if Providence was really thinking of us, there comes up, almost as we was speaking of you, the letter-carrier, with one from you, a-saying as you'd come : and she's not bin same lass since."

" You are a good, clever father," said Susan ; " and what about poor Tom Bertram ? "

" I've said nowt about Tom, poor lad ; eh, but that chap going away has cut me up almost as much as t'other affair ! There seems a deal of ill-luck in my lass's bit of love-making. I shall just ask you to tell her about Tom ; she's sure to feel it a bit, but not as much as me and my missus has, for we were very fond of Tom, and he's just as like to get killed as not ; there's one thing, if he doesna he'll make them Frenchmen dance."

"Yes," said Susan. "I suppose you know that Mr. North enlisted in the same regiment."

"Ah, Tom towd me; him and North was great friends; but I'm afeared I'm wounding your feelings a bit now; you mun stop me if I am."

"No, don't mind me; tell me what he said."

"He said as folks thowt Mr. North had gin everything up, because he'd lost his place, and rioters had smashed his inventions; but the real truth was a bit of disappointment in another quarter; but there, you never know why young chaps will go a-soldiering; it's the music, and the flags, and liking adventures, and them foreigners bragging that they can whop us as does it."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Susan.

By this time they had reached the gate,

which opened upon the drive to the Home Farm. A couple of children raced for the honour of opening it, and they both swung upon it as it closed with a click after the gig had passed through.

A solid yet picturesque old house, that of the Home Farm, built of stone, with old-fashioned mullioned windows and diamond-panes ; with a garden in front, half vegetables, half flowers, and at this time of the year golden with sunflowers, turning their great brown and yellow faces to the light ; with a broad flag-stone pavement from the garden-gate to the front door, which was wide open, showing a rubbing-stoned hall with an old chest in it, and a tall oak clock-case in which you could hear the pendulum swinging ; with a well half-way down the garden, and a bucket swinging above it ; and on one side of the house a farmyard upon which the

back-door opened, and on the other the stack-yard, with half a dozen wheat-stacks and as many hay-stacks, the former new, the latter partly old.

It was cleaning day. All the work had been done, and "the missus" was expected home to tea—home from Chesterfield market, with the forthcoming week's provisions, and the money for her butter and cheese. In those days a farmer's wife was not ashamed to carry her poultry and butter, her fruit and cheese, to market, and sell it herself. At the present time a woman in the position of Mrs. Kirk would be a visitor in a silk dress at the local schools, and, when she deigned to enter a country tradesman's shop, she would expect the special homage of all the establishment. When Mr. Kirk farmed, all his family engaged in the industry of house and homestead, just as the colonial farmers do

to-day in Australia and New Zealand, just as the families of the agriculturists of the Western States of America do. One of the reasons why the English farmer is falling back in the international race is to be found in the social changes which have come over our rural districts. "The missus" no longer makes her own cheese and butter; she is a fine lady now, bless her heart! and plays on the piano; she studies fashions instead of cookery books; she does crewel work instead of spinning sheets, and when she goes to the village *fête*, an archery meeting, a harvest home, or what not, she must outvie the parson's wife in her dress, and even make a millinery effort to eclipse the stuck-up ladies of the "gentleman-farmer" (the newest thing in agriculturists), who combines banking with wheat-growing, or merely farms for amusement.

Heaven forbid that I should thrust my head into a hornet's nest by saying that this "social advance" of the farmer's wife and family is the sole reason why agriculture is no longer a profitable business; it is one only among others which it is not my province to discuss; I only desire to point out that in the old days farming meant getting up early and taking a hand at the plough, sowing the seed yourself, being personally busy in the lambing season, taking a turn at sheep-shearing, selling your own wheat in the local market, having helped to gather and thrash it, while the good wife and her pretty daughter assisted to milk the cows, churn the butter, make the cheese, feed the pigs, manage the poultry, and keep the house in order. That was how Farmer Kirk and his wife viewed their duties, though they owned the freehold of a hundred acres, farmed

four hundred, and had five thousand pounds in the bank.

It would have done your heart good to have seen Mrs. Kirk in her red shawl and poke bonnet come into the house on this September day, carrying a heavy basket of groceries, Margaret the dairymaid carrying two more; while the cart and thick-legged horse, which Mrs. Kirk had driven to and from the market, stood outside the garden-gate, waiting for Margaret to back the cart into the shed, and take Dobbin out and put him in the stable, which she would do as well and cheerfully as any one of the farm men, who, on this Saturday, were having their "bit of holiday," granted them once a fortnight, to enjoy the excitement of the market for two or three hours, returning home to "supper up" the horses and see all straight for the night, and be ready half of them for church in the

morning, the other half going in the afternoon.

"Eh! but I am glad to see thee!" exclaimed Mrs. Kirk, putting down her basket and shaking hands with Susan, "it's good for sore eyes to see thy handsome face in our house. And tha's come to stop a bit! Well, that is good of thee!"

Susan was sitting in Mr. Kirk's arm-chair, Mary on a stool at her feet. Mary got up as her mother came in, and helped to lift the basket into the window-seat. Mr. Kirk, at an old-fashioned desk, was poring over the week's accounts.

"Nay, Mary lass, I can manage," said Mrs. Kirk, a little surprised at her daughter's sudden alacrity, for she had been listless hitherto, though not so much as during the time before Kirk had engaged in that long conversation with her which he had described to Susan.

"Margaret!" continued the dear old lady, calling to the girl outside, "make haste with that horse and we'll have tea laid."

"I'll do that, mother," said Mary, bustling about with a sprightliness that caused Mrs. Kirk to look inquiringly at her husband, who had raised his head from his accounts to nod significantly at his wife.

Tea things from a corner cupboard were speedily laid on a large oak table, without a tray or cloth, white cups and saucers, old blue delf plates and a china tea-pot. At the dresser Mrs. Kirk, having taken off her shawl and bonnet, and put on a clean apron, stood and cut bread and butter. Margaret presently brought in a dish of watercresses and lettuce. Mary produced a currant loaf and a jar of damson jam from the pantry; and just as they were all ready to sit down, in came,

one after the other, half a dozen rosy children, who took their places and their food almost simultaneously, all rather shyly glancing at the fine lady from Chesterfield, and all ordered at the close of the repast to get washed early and be in bed by nine o'clock. Saturday at the Home Farm was like the Jews' ceremony of the Passover; it was a day of cleaning up. The scouring and mopping that began the day ended at night with the tubbing of the children; and, when everybody went to bed, all the linen for the next day was hung round the kitchen-fire, so that there should be no mistake about the clean shirts and hose being properly aired for the next morning.

They slept together in the same room, Susan and Mary, and on that Saturday night they sat together in the starlight, and exchanged a world of confidences.

Mary having “found her tongue,” prattled of her sorrow and made many vows of everlasting spinsterhood. The kindness of her father, her mother’s patience with her, and her sudden awakening to a sense of her duty to them, were the leading themes of her discourse, which was of the most simple, innocent character, interspersed with tears and an occasional hugging of Susan, who she declared was the dearest and best girl in the world.

Susan felt a soothing pleasure in listening to her friend, who was still the same fair violet-eyed beauty, the robustness of her figure somewhat toned down by her trouble. Still it was a pastoral dairy-maidish kind of beauty contrasted with the high-bred physiognomy and the educated grace and manners of Susan Hardwick. Mary, too, spoke with a little of the Derbyshire dialect, the vowels rounded and full, and

there was a certain homeliness in her smiles and expressions which was characteristic of the times and the country. Susan's refinements of manner were reflected in her trained voice and pronunciation ; though there was a certain boldness of expression, a certain indifference in her opinions, a certain daring in her views of life, that were the offspring of a naturally strong intellect, cultivated by reading, stimulated by some years of alliance with her father in "keeping up appearances," and promoted by the peculiarly lonely and untrammelled mode of her life.

It was a picture of rural happiness and content the next morning to see the Kirk family walking across the autumn fields, and along the grass-grown highway to church. They were all in their best clothes, and, in the distance, they looked like a variegated ship, flying many colours,

sailing on a calm green sea, for the meadows they passed through towards Hasland were grazing lands. But come close to the family group, and you would see a bit of honest, healthy, English humanity, and simple rural pride, that one regrets to feel is becoming more and more a picture of past days. In the present it must be said we are consistent. We dress our prosaic manners and habits in fitting costume so far as the lords of creation are concerned; though our women are wisely taking pattern from the past in their dresses of to-day.

But to our procession on its way to church. First came Farmer Kirk in his brown coat and breeches, flowered waist-coat, ribbed worsted stockings, buckled shoes, and broad-brimmed hat. On his arm his buxom wife of three and forty summers, in her chintz gown with roses on

it, a green quilted petticoat, and poke bonnet, trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbons. She was a matured Mary Kirk, a little stouter, with a ruddier face and darker hair ; but she did not look half the three or four and twenty years she was older than her daughter. Following the heads of the house came Miss Hardwick and Mary, the former in a white satin dress trimmed with lace, a white satin hat lined with pink, and gay with ostrich feathers ; the latter in a plain print dress, flat straw bonnet, satin shoes with high heels, and a black scarf. Then came six or eight boys and girls in twos, from Jack and Tom of fifteen and seventeen, down to Polly and Jane of five and seven—an English county family worth looking upon. They filled, with the farm servants who had gone on first, two pews in the old church, two high, solemn apartments,

which shut out everything and everybody except the parson and the one stained-glass window at the east end, in which the apostles were delineated in attitudes well calculated to inspire wonder, if not veneration.

As they returned home to their early Sunday dinner, Susan and Mary talked of many things besides the sermon. They fell behind the family group some distance, and at the stile leading from the lane into the meadows, half a mile or so from the farm, where you can see Brackenbury Towers, lying away in the valley, Susan said she was tired, and they sat down.

"Well, there was no ghost in the sermon this morning," said Susan. "Don't you remember telling me that the Vicar of Chesterfield came and preached about ghosts, as if you were not already frightened enough."

Mary turned pale. Susan had unwittingly touched other memories besides those of the Ellerbie legends.

Somehow there was a fascination for Susan in the subject of Brackenbury Towers. She shivered a little at it, but she liked to hear about the strange old place, its deep, still lake, and its weird history.

"No," said Mary, "it was a more comforting discourse than is general with Parson Briddon."

"What is the matter?" Susan asked, taking Mary's hand, "you have turned white."

"Nothing," said Mary, though she had in her mind's eye the figure of poor Jacob Marks standing in the dock at Derby; the mention of ghosts had conjured it up; and, strange to say, at that very moment Mr. Theophilus Short entered the meadow

on the other side, a Bible in his hand, a devilish humility in his gait ; he was going home by a short cut from Chesterfield, where he had been attending a “love feast” at his favourite chapel.

Short never hesitated a moment, but came straight on, bending lowly and climbing the stile, while his shadow fell upon the two girls. At sight of him Mary rose and clung to Susan as if for protection, and, as he passed them, she fainted. Susan held her for a moment, and then laid her against the grassy bank by the stile, while she ran a little way down the meadow, and, making a cup of her two hands, brought some water from a rivulet and sprinkled her face. The girl soon recovered.

“What is it, my dear child?” asked Susan, pale herself now with anxiety.

“Did you see that man?” asked Mary, looking over her shoulder in affright.

“Yes. What of him?”

“I see him in my saddest dreams,” said the girl, trembling.

“Who is he?”

“Mr. Short—Theophilus Short,” said the girl, in a whisper.

CHAPTER VI.

UNDER SUN AND MOON.

And yet, believe me, good as well as ill,
Woman's at best a contradiction still.

POPE.

THE next day a carriage drawn by four horses, on which were mounted two postillions, came labouring along the road and through the Home Farm gateway, finally pulling up at Mr. Kirk's house.

A servant jumped down from the dickey of the old family chariot, with imposing armorial bearings on its yellow panels, and, letting down the steps, opened the door.

Mr. Hardwick, prim and jaunty, stepped out first and waited until the Earl (in velvet suit, bag-wig, ruffles, and buckled shoes) was also fairly landed, an old buck who did not even deign to carry a stick, as his friend Hardwick did.

The visitors considerably fluttered Mrs. Kirk's household. The farmer was out in the fields, so were those of the children who had not gone to a dame's school at Hasland. Miss Hardwick and Mary Kirk were at home. Mary was tying up some bundles of lavender on the kitchen table, to be put into the linen chest and into the drawers upstairs. Susan Hardwick was sitting by the fire sewing. Mrs. Kirk was busy preparing the household's early dinner.

"I hope we do not disturb you, Mrs. Kirk," said Mr. Hardwick, taking off his

hat. “Susan, my love, I trust you are quite well.”

Mrs. Kirk curtsied to the Earl, who bowed most politely, saying, at the same time,

“Ladies, I wish you good Morrow.”

“Thank you, father,” said Susan, “I am very well.”

Hardwick kissed his daughter.

“I trust your good man is well,” said the Earl, addressing Mrs. Kirk.

“Yes, thank heaven, my lord, Kirk is in the enjoyment of good health; but wonnat you tak a seat? Come forward into the best parlour.”

“No, no,” said the Earl, quickly interposing his own person between Mrs. Kirk and the parlour door; “nothing could be more pleasant than this comfortable kitchen, and I declare, 'pon my honour, I

have smelt nothing so sweet as your lavender."

"We called to pay our respects, Mrs. Kirk, and to ask your permission for Miss Kirk to accompany my daughter Susan to Brackenbury Towers," said Mr. Hardwick, leaving no opening for Susan to decline, and making it equally difficult for Mrs. Kirk not to consent on behalf of Mary.

"I wish the master was in," said Mrs. Kirk, with a little hesitation in her manner.
"I like him to—"

"My daughter," said Hardwick, breaking in upon Mrs. Kirk's half-finished remark, "has not yet seen the wonders and the beauties of the ancient hall; perhaps Miss Kirk has?"

He looked at Mary, inviting her answer rather than her mother's.

"I have not been all over Brackenbury," said Mary; "but I have seen the chapel,

the picture-gallery, and the grounds."

The old Earl sat in Kirk's arm-chair and gazed at Susan.

"Ah! then you must come with Susan," said Mr. Hardwick. "I will not keep her long, Mrs. Kirk; they shall return to the farm long before it is dusk. There, my dears, get on your things; it is a lovely day."

Mary looked at her mother.

"Yes, love," said Mrs. Kirk, "and I daresay it will do you good"—a remark which Mr. Hardwick heartily endorsed.

Mary was nothing loth to go. She laid her lavender aside, and, putting her arm round Susan, bade her come and get ready.

Lord Ellerbie envied Mary her familiarity with Susan. An old fellow's love is often more solicitous of recognition on the part of the lady whom it favours than a young man's. Age knows its own short-

comings, and is full of jealous doubts and fears. Youth is turbulent and exacting in its jealous fits. Age is contented with a smile where youth asks passionate devotion. Lord Ellerbie was in love with Susan. It was the unthinking, headlong desire of an old man, and there was hardly anything he would not do to win the mill-owner's tantalising daughter. If parental authority was to go for anything in this traffic of hearts and hands, Hardwick would settle it, and that quickly.

Lord Ellerbie handed Mary Kirk into the yellow chariot with quite a gallant air, reserving, however, his admiring glances for Susan. He was chatty and affable with Mary—respectful, almost humble, to Susan.

They drove through lanes which were as soft as carpets with grass and fallen leaves. The wheels hardly made a sound, though the carriage jolted and plunged.

It was a bright, bracing autumn day.

Presently they passed through a pair of tall wrought-iron gates that were hung upon stone pillars surrounded with a pair of griffins that grinned at you over a pair of shields. The carriage drive was hemmed in with yew and holly, with box and fir, and these had a background on one side of oak and ash and other forest trees ; on the other was a tall bank, which in the spring was full of primroses and violets. By-and-by the bank declined and undulated, showing here and there glimpses of the lake that seemed to sleep in a fringe of bullrushes, which were repeated upside-down along the margin, making a sort of frame for the gables and towers and curious chimneys of Brackenbury.

The carriage swung round by the west wing and into the moss-grown courtyard, pulling up opposite the main entrance to

the Towers. The doors were already opened, and the housekeeper—a tall, starchy, elderly lady—was waiting to receive them. An aged priest passed along the corridor and disappeared.

Mr. Hardwick offered his arm to Mary, leaving Susan to the Earl.

“Allow me,” said Hardwick, “with Lord Ellerbie’s permission, to lead the way.”

The old Earl tendered his arm to Susan with a grand air, and Miss Hardwick accepted the homage gracefully. They walked along corridors dimly lighted by oriel windows, with quaint bits of furniture here and there, and old-fashioned pictures ; through curious old rooms half furnished and covered with tapestry.

Mr. Hardwick was the showman.

“This part of Brackenbury Towers,” he said, pausing in a suite of rooms with mullioned windows that overlooked the

lake, "has not been occupied since Mary Queen of Scots lived here in the custody of an illustrious ancestor of Lord Ellerbie. Observe, my dears, the exquisite tapestry, some of it embroidered by her own fair hands. The divine command notwithstanding, one cannot help envying the owner of such a palace as this; combining as it does the romance of the past with the English comforts of the present. We shall shortly come to the more modern apartments; they will prove equally delightful, I am sure."

"Your father is quite an enthusiast in his admiration of Brackenbury," said Lord Ellerbie to Susan, as they passed out of the Mary Queen of Scots wing, as they called that part of the hall they had been inspecting.

"He was always much interested in antiquities," said Susan, coldly.

“Knows a world of things about pedigrees and family histories,” said the Earl, making a desperate effort to induce Susan to talk.

“Yes, I believe he does.”

“Your own family is very ancient?”

“Yes.”

“It is a serious responsibility, the honour and dignity of ancestry—serious, yet a happy responsibility, as your father well puts it; yes, happy; don’t you think so?”

“A child would ill-become her duty to question a father’s opinion on such a subject; but I do not estimate so highly the mere claims of birth as my father does,” said Susan, in her most authoritative manner.

“No, no,” said the old lover, quickly; “now there I agree with you, Miss Hardwick; great deeds may ennable the most lowly—yes, yes.”

"And yet there is an indescribable satisfaction in the clear knowledge of long descent," said Susan.

"Truly, truly, you say well, Miss Hardwick," answered the Earl. "Will you not sit a while and look at this battle piece? It is supposed to represent the founder of the Ellerbie family at Agincourt. Yes, he stands with his mailed foot on the neck of that powerful knight whose banner he has captured. Yes, and you will notice that the victor is not a young man; on the contrary, he is elderly, almost old. He was a faithful painter the artist who depicted that scene, faithful to history."

Susan had taken a seat, and the Earl was standing in front of the picture.

"Your father laughs at my admiration of this picture; he is cynical, and says I regard it as flattering to myself, which is cruel. I don't consider myself old, not at

all ; gad's life, I am young at heart, Miss Hardwick, and claim the privilege of manhood to be only as old as it feels, and no more, and no more." *

He drew himself up and straightened his back as he spoke, and was at all events not an unpicturesque figure as he stood on the polished floor, his plum-coloured velvet coat setting off his florid complexion.

" Ah ! you are laughing at me," he said, as Susan raised her face to hide a smile. " I know you are. I don't mind, Miss Hardwick ; you may, you may. I am your father's partner now ; yes, yes. Did you not know that we had made a compact ?"

" I have heard something of it," said Susan.

" Yes, it is so ; on my life I feel quite a busy man ; we are going to do marvels with the mill, and there are other schemes

on foot—yes, we have surprises in store for the county."

Susan rose, for the echoes of the footsteps of her friend and father had already died away. Again the old Earl was by her side, ready to escort her.

"It is a supreme pleasure, Miss Hardwick, to see you in these old halls," he said, as she leaned lightly on his arm; "it makes me feel young again, I do assure you—yes, not that I am really old, as I tell your father. Fifty is not old, eh? Is it? Do you, my dear young lady, regard fifty as antiquated?"

"I have not thought about it," said Susan.

"If you did honour such a subject to the extent of thinking about it, would you estimate fifty as a very serious age?"

"No; one cannot help it if one should be seventy," said Susan, mentioning, with-

out knowing it, the Earl's correct age.

"That is true ; that is most true, my dear young lady, an old age endowed with luxury and wealth, moreover. Gad's life ! that is better than youth with an empty purse and a fireless hearth, eh ? Do you not go with me there ?"

"It is pleasant to have wealth," said Susan, thinking, for the moment, of the many pecuniary troubles of the pretentious Hall in Lordsmill Street, with its miserable struggle at keeping up appearances.

"I do not always think so ; if one has a great object in life, yes, yes ; if one has some one to share it with, yes ; but here we are in your father's favourite room—ah ! yes, just in time."

Mr. William Rutland Hardwick was showing Miss Kirk some of the curious Ellerbie books and manuscripts, while a servant was placing luncheon upon a small table near

the fire. It was dainty fare of which the Earl invited them to partake. A dish of trout from the Rother (which in those days was a clear dancing stream, with the king-fisher darting to and fro like a winged ruby), a brace of pheasants from the Ellerbie covers, a bottle of rare Madeira for Hardwick, and a bottle of old cowslip wine and some cherry brandy for the girls. They sat down, and Hardwick played the part of host. The wood logs crackled on the hearth ; the green park stretched away for miles below the windows ; fat servitors handed round the wine and then disappeared, Lord Ellerbie telling the ladies he always preferred taking breakfast and luncheon without attendance.

“I am so very happy,” whispered Hardwick to his daughter, while the Earl was speaking to Mary Kirk. “My dear Susan, you are a very good girl to love your father

so much ; ah ! I wish your poor dear mother could see you now."

After luncheon Hardwick asked Miss Kirk if she had ever seen the Ellerbie jewels. Mary said no, and Mary was very meek and humble in her manners generally ; for Lord Ellerbie hitherto had been to her a sort of local god, next in awful importance to the Ellerbie ghost, with which, by the way, she had once or twice expected to be confronted in the rambling old galleries of the Queen of Scots' wing. She had never once dared to mention the subject to Mr. Kirk, and the strange flash of the jewels which Lord Ellerbie's privileged friend spread out upon the library table, having taken them from a great iron chest built into the wall, completely took possession of Mary's sense of wonder. Susan's eyes also seemed to reflect back the luminous sparkle of the gems. Lord Ellerbie

invited her to try on the necklace of his grandmother, in which was set a wonderful Indian stone as a pendant. Susan politely declined, and the Earl asked Mary to allow him to place it on her neck. Mary consented, and Susan admired the great flashing stone which was called the Ellerbie-Indian.

“Yes, Miss Hardwick,” said the Earl, “there is a story or legend attached to it. A noble fell in love with the daughter of an Indian prince; she was much younger than the noble, and the prince for some reason banished him to the mountains, having stripped him of titles and wealth. For years this noble wandered about the untrodden wastes. He knew that the prince was mercenary, and loved gems above everything. One day the lover found in the dry bed of a river a great diamond; he took it to a priest of his

order who had once been his friend, and the priest, taking compassion on him, went to the prince, offering the gem as a ransom of the banished noble. Never had been seen so wonderful a stone. The prince called his Ministers and people together, and the gem was proved, on which the prince reinstated the noble, who was now almost old, and also gave him his youngest daughter to wife ; and although there was a disparity in their years they lived happy together. Gad's life ! it is many a long day since I told that story."

Mr. Hardwick lifted the gem from Mary's neck and handed it to Susan, who, examining it, said it was very beautiful and interesting, and then laid it in its velvet case.

"Here is a ring which Mary Queen of Scots wore," said the Earl. "Have I your permission, Hardwick, to present it to

your daughter? It has no intrinsic value, but it is of historic interest, and 'pon my life it has a goodly shape and setting."

Hardwick bowed his acquiescence, and looked at Susan.

"Thank you, Lord Ellerbie, I will not deprive you of such an historic treasure," said Susan.

"Nay, Miss Hardwick, your acceptance would make it valuable in my eyes, yes, yes. Well, then, pray let me beg that you will carry away some other little memento of your first visit to the Towers; these buckles, ah! yes, gad's life! you must."

Hardwick looked appealingly at his daughter.

"Thank you, since you insist," said Susan, allowing the Earl to lay the case upon the table near her fan.

"And, Miss Kirk," said the Earl, "I hope your mother will honour me by allowing you to accept this brooch; it is two hundred years old."

"Oh, my lord, you are too kind," said Mary; "it is my mother and myself who will be honoured."

The old Earl bowed, and begged he might pin the jewel upon her dress. Mary smiled a ready consent, and old Hardwick began to hate Mary, and regard her as a forward minx, who might at the last moment defeat his ambitious hopes.

"Nay, I do profess but it becomes you mighty well," said the Earl, regarding Mary's blushing face with undisguised admiration.

Mr. Hardwick, with the thoughtfulness of a match-making mother, took Mary aside to show her a curious picture, and the Earl, with the astuteness of Mephis-

topheles himself, began talking to Susan of the loveliness of her friend.

"I have, of course, seen Miss Kirk often," he said; "yes, yes, quite frequently; but only to-day has my judgment credited her with being beautiful."

"She is as good as she is beautiful," said Susan.

"Of that I am persuaded; it is no plebeian face, there is the short upper lip that denotes blood, and a little experience would give her the tone of a court. On my life she will make a fine woman," he said, turning round to look at her.

"Yes," said Susan.

"There is a sad romance in her life," he said, "which stimulates sympathy, too, poor child; but time is curing her, and a little trouble is almost a beautifier in some cases. Bless me! bless me! what a sweet creature she is!"

Susan looked round at Mary, who was standing in a graceful, unstudied attitude. A thick braid of her golden brown hair had fallen upon her shoulder. Her head was half turned, so that the profile of her soft features could be seen. Part of her figure was disclosed by her cloak being unfastened, and falling in a ripple of maroon cashmere upon the floor. If she had been posed for her picture, she could not have looked prettier.

Was it a twinge of jealousy, ever so slight, that Lord Ellerbie thought he saw shadow Susan's face for a moment? If it was, it went as quickly as it came.

"She is indeed beautiful!" exclaimed Susan.

Mary turned round, for Susan had spoken loudly.

"Yes, you are," said Susan, going up to

her and kissing her ; " it was you we were talking of."

" Oh, Susan, how could you ?" said Mary, in blushing confusion, and hiding her face in her friend's neck.

" You fool ! " hissed Hardwick aside to Susan, and nobody else heard the remark, not even Lord Ellerbie, who, if he had not been so deeply in love with Susan, would have been amused at the troubled and anxious face of his friend.

" We must be true to our word," said the Earl, putting an end to the little scene. " We promised that the ladies should return before dusk, and I hear the carriage —yes, yes, I hear it ; it is the coach we call my lady's coach. I want you to tell me if you like it, Miss Hardwick, the next time we meet ; and, Miss Kirk, you will ask your mother to accept some fruit and

wine which I have ordered to be put up for you. My lady's coach—yes, it was made in Paris, and brought over in a Royal ship ; you will tell me if you like it, Miss Hardwick—yes, yes.”

The old Earl hovered about Susan as he talked, and then he handed her into the carriage. He kissed her fingers with great ceremony, and said, “Gad’s life ! my dear young lady, Brackenbury Towers will seem more lovely than ever after this visit—this honoured, this treasured visit.”

In the deep shadow of their own bedroom that night, when they could only hear each other’s voices, the two girls talked themselves to sleep.

“Well, I think him a dear old gentleman,” said Mary. “I had no idea he was so nice. I used to be frightened at him.”

"He is well enough for an old man," said Susan.

"But he is a lord ; we all curtsey, and the men take off their hats and stand bare-headed, when we meet him ; and to think of his giving me a brooch, and me sitting at the same table !"

"You seem much impressed, Mary."

"Yes, I am. I feel quite proud, though I know he didn't do it all for me."

"No !—for whom, then ?"

"For you—to please you," said Mary ; "why, anybody can see he's over head and ears in love with you. Mother noticed it, and said you'd likely be his third wife."

"Did she ? You are more likely to be the Countess than I," said Susan.

"Me !—a farmer's daughter with no ancestors !—what nonsense ! Why, your father considers your family as good as

the Earl's, nay nobler ; he told me so ; and he thinks it would be a great honour for you to accept the Earl."

" Oh ! then you talked about us, did you ?"

" Of course we did ! Only think, if you were Countess of Ellerbie, having those jewels, and my lady's coach, and that beautiful—what did he call it ?"

" I don't know to what you are referring."

" Boo——something," said Mary.

" Boudoir ?

" Yes, that's it, all lined with satin. Your father said it was fit for any princess, and so I should think, for I never thought there was anything half so lovely in the world."

" Then you would marry Lord Ellerbie if you were me ?"

" I believe I would ; that is, if my father

wanted me to as much as yours does."

" Yet your father was most desirous that you should look favourably on Tom Bertram."

" Ah ! that is quite different," said Mary, altering her tone.

" No, Mary, not quite different."

" Don't talk about me, Susan, talk about yourself."

" I do not want to talk at all."

" I do," said Mary, who possibly, having for some months had her tongue lying dormant, as it were, desired now to make up for lost time.

They had called her a chatterbox in those happy days before the fatal trouble which had fallen upon Jacob Marks, and now that the affectionate appeals of her father, and the companionship of Miss Hardwick, had restored her to familiar converse with her family, she appeared to

be recovering her former spirits with unexpected rapidity. She had given quite a lively narrative to her father and mother and the family of the day at Brackenbury Towers. She had rattled on at such a rate that Mr. and Mrs. Kirk had looked at her and at each other in surprise. The children had sat open-mouthed at her volubility, and her description of the Ellerbie treasures was to them like a chapter out of a certain fairy-tale which one of the boys had won in a lottery at the Chesterfield May Fair. Mary was getting better quickly. Mrs. Kirk agreed with her that nobody could be more pleasant than Lord Ellerbie; but the children were greatly disappointed at the declaration of Mary's belief that there was not any ghost at all at Brackenbury Towers.

"Go to sleep, dear," said Susan presently.

“I don’t want to go to sleep,” answered Mary, wide awake. “I shall never forget those diamonds, Susan. Oh! that necklace, it was lovely!—and your father says you might have them all to-morrow if you liked.”

“If I liked to marry Bluebeard.”

“Who’s Bluebeard?”

“Who! Surely you know whom I mean; it was you who told me they called Lord Ellerbie Bluebeard, and that there is a ghost at the Towers.”

Mary shuddered; the curtain-rings of the old oak bedstead chattered above their heads.

“Don’t speak of such things—you frighten me: I was only a silly child and didn’t know any better.”

“I was thinking about those other wives while you were looking at the books,” said Susan, “and wondering whether he kept

that jewel-case sometimes in the room which nobody was to open. ‘Sister Ann, Sister Ann, do you see anyone coming down the road?’”

“Oh, Susan, don’t!—pray don’t! You’ll frighten me out of my wits!” exclaimed Mary, burying her head under the clothes.

“Very well, then; good night, I am not going to talk any more,” said Susan.

“Not if we talk about Oliver North?”

“How do you know I am likely to feel interested in Oliver North?”

“Why, didn’t I see him at the Hall when I was staying with you at Chesterfield?”

“Yes, well, what of him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did my father say anything of him?”

“No.”

“Do you know that he has gone away?”

"No ; where to ?"

"To the wars."

"Has he ? What, to invent something ?"

"Gone as a recruit, as a common soldier."

"No ! What did he do that for ?"

"Because he is silly."

"In what way ?"

"Just as young men are silly when they cannot do as they please."

"What did he want to do ?"

"He was in love with me."

"Yes, I know he was ; what then ?"

"He had no patience ; he quarrelled with my father and called him names, in my presence ; and I told him not to come and see me again."

"Quite right ; the idea of calling your father names ! mine would have knocked him down ; but yours is a gentleman, and

it wouldn't do for him to act like that, would it?"

"I don't know, I am sure; I am very fond of Mr. North."

"Did he call again?"

"No, he went off to be a soldier; just as any common man might do."

"Poor fellow! And didn't you see him again?"

"Yes; I sent for him."

"Who did you send?"

"Another person as silly as himself who had been and done the same thing all about some other girl."

"Who was that?"

"Tom Bertram."

Mary did not speak again for a little while.

"What had that person done?"

"Enlisted for a soldier."

"Why?"

"Because he was dying of love for Mary Kirk, and, like that other wise person, thought that the best way of proving it, I suppose."

"Oh ! Susan, is that so ?"

"Yes."

"Oh ! I am so miserable!"

"Don't be miserable. It made me miserable at first, but now it makes me angry ! To think that men who would have us believe they are such great creatures can be so weak. Tom Bertram is very fond of you !"

Mary was quiet.

"Are you asleep ?"

"No ; I wish I was now."

"Have I made you unhappy ?"

"A little. I was wondering what had become of Tom, and I have been expecting we should meet him somewhere about the lanes."

"Did you know nothing of this?"

"No."

"Would you be angry if I gave him something of yours?"

"I couldn't be angry at anything you did."

"I gave him that bracelet you gave me, and I promised not to let you forget him."

"Poor fellow!" said Mary, and she pressed Susan's hand; "don't talk about him any more, it makes me feel ill, and then I shall dream and see that horrid man Short! If I scream in my sleep, awake me, Susan! It will be that fearful man we saw on Sunday. And just as I was trying to forget it all! Oh, Susan, you don't know what I have suffered!"

The girl burst into tears, and the two friends said no more that night. When the moon came round that way and looked

in through the half-drawn blinds and curtains, it saw Mary Kirk pillow'd on Susan's arm fast asleep, a picture of innocence and peace.

What else did the moon see that night?

It saw two old men sitting late over their cups, the one needy and ready to sell his child for gold, the other weak, lascivious, and ready to buy her. It saw a father sitting over the first fire of autumn in an old-fashioned clerical study, thinking of his son gone to the wars without his blessing, gone away without a kindly word at parting. It saw a poor unhappy girl rocking to sleep a fretful child, and thinking over plans for leaving her home and carrying this loved evidence of her shame with her; for Sandy Burns, her father, was continually upbraiding her, and virtuous Chesterfield pointed the finger of

scorn at her whenever she went out into the market-place or crept into the shadows of the back streets. It saw Lawyer Dobbs spinning his villainous web, and Philip Scruton masquerading as some one else, and it knew the coward under the lion's skin just the same as before. It saw a troop-ship tossing on the ocean with Oliver North and Tom Bertram and Ensign Wingfield on board, bound for Lisbon on foreign service, and it made a long white track for the ship which climbed the waves like a living thing. All these and thousands of other slaves of Passion the moon with its attendant stars looked down upon. Fancy might imagine it lingering pitifully on that lovely Scotch lassie crooning sadly over her child ; but the moon has no function of sympathy, or we might pity it for the agonies it must witness. Yet it seemed to dwell upon that ship crowded with brave

hearts going forth on their red mission ;
and there was many a wistful face looking
up at it that night and thinking of the
English homes they might never see again,
and of the loved ones on whom they had
perhaps looked their last.

CHAPTER VII.

CONSPIRATORS IN COUNCIL.

“ London is a safer hiding-place than the Forest, or the secret cavern. The hunted man rushed into its mighty crowd and was lost for ever. Truly a great city is more solitary than the desert, and for refuge both to the wicked and the good it hath ever shady corners and places of retreat. Murderer, thief, highwayman, plotter, the broken-hearted, the dishonoured, the miser, the misanthrope, the runaway from tyranny and debt, find ready shelter; ay, even in the very bustle of the crowded streets.”

IF Nannie Dawson had lived in Fleet Street during her ninety years, instead of vegetating in that little cottage outside the great busy world at the back of Lordsmills Street in Chesterfield, she might have

bought her tobacco and snuff at the very same shop as David Garrick; she might have seen Oliver Goldsmith going into Richardson's office to read the proofs of Richardson's novels, which he printed himself at No. 76; she might have seen Hogarth, Dr. Johnson, Dr. Young, and Secker, Archbishop of Canterbury, also go in and out on visits to the author of "Clarissa Harlowe;" she might have bought from Cobbett himself a copy of his Political Register, even though she were incapable of understanding it; she would have been sure to visit Mrs. Salmon's waxworks in Fleet Street, and she would probably have been a young woman among the persons whom Walpole saw looking through spy-glasses (halfpenny a peep) at the new heads on Temple Bar; for as late as 1825 a person aged eighty-seven remembered these very heads being seen through a telescope from Leicester Fields.

At the period of this present history the iron poles and spikes whereon had been exhibited the heads and mangled limbs of men called traitors still decorated Temple Bar; the remains of Salmon's waxworks were still exhibited in apartments at the corner of Inner Temple Gate (once a Royal Palace, and to-day a barber's shop); the *Times* newspaper was printed on a hand press; John Murray had just brought out the *Quarterly Review*, and was negotiating with Lord Byron for the publication of a new poem which he was writing, called "Childe Harold." Fleet Street was still a picturesque thoroughfare, with half-timbered houses and picturesque gables, bow-windowed shops and wooden posts that separated the side walk from the streets. Out of many windows the old-fashioned poles still projected, bearing at the end creaking signs indicative of the businesses

carried on within. Sedan chairs were in use; the watermen plied their trade on the adjacent river, rivalling in speed and cheapness the lumbering hackney coach of the streets. At night the dirty thoroughfares were dimly lighted with oil-lamps, though a dreamer had already promised to illuminate the city with gas; and in the summer the spluttering oil-burners were often not lighted at all. On winter and summer nights pedestrians and those who could afford chairs and coaches had to employ the assistance of link-boys who ran before them with torches, and occasionally ran them into a thieves' ambush, where, having been robbed, they were glad to escape with their lives. The times, it is true, had improved from the days of Pope and Gray, and the pictures by Hogarth were already beginning to be strong exaggerations. The period was nevertheless so rude and un-

settled, yet so picturesque, in comparative dirt and vagabondism, that it is hard to feel we live in the same century, and so close to events which we now look back upon with wonder and surprise; though I myself remember the Duke of Wellington a familiar figure in St. James's Park; I have seen a newly-elected Member of Parliament chaired in a fashionable city; I saw one of the first railway trains that ran on the Midland Railway; I have spoken to the great George Stephenson; and only some dozen or fifteen years ago was introduced to his friend Mr. Nicholas Wood; I remember when the watchmen called the hours of the night; and so persistently are old customs maintained in England that at what is called the New Inn in Wych Street you may still hear the old cries to this day. Only recently in this very locality I met an old man who remembered the Cato Street

Conspiracy and the execution of the five prisoners ; and at the burial of the young prince the other day at Chislehurst there was a veteran present who saw the funeral of Napoleon I. at St. Helena, and who was also present at the interment of the exhumed remains in Paris.

The comparatively young among us remember the first locomotive, the first telegram, the first photograph, the first revolver, while the first penny newspaper is quite a recent event. And there are men and women still living who were boys and girls in London when Mr. Septimus Dobbs and the Hon. Philip Scruton passed under Temple Bar while it was still decorated with its sanguinary poles and spikes ; and men and women still living in Derbyshire who were children when the Law hanged poor Jacob Marks innocently, as London a few years later executed Eliza Fenning for

poisoning a family (none of whom died, and she suffered most), to which crime one of the family afterwards confessed on his deathbed. The poor girl went to the scaffold in the cap and dress she had made for her wedding day, just as our Jacob Marks had gone to his grave almost on the eve of his marriage with Mary Kirk.

It was on the night of the first frost of autumn, and only a week or ten days after the troops marched out of Chesterfield, that Mr. Septimus Dobbs had arranged to meet Scruton at the Cock Tavern over against Temple Bar.

The oil-lamps of Fleet Street flickered in the biting autumn air seventy odd years ago. The innumerable signs that swung above the tradesmen's doors creaked and wheezed. A few dim lights from the various shop windows cast mysterious reflections upon the pavement, upon pedestrians,

sedan chairs, and loiterers "after no good."

A hackney coach now and then rattled and trembled over the ill-paved street, and in the falling shadows of the night flashing lights appeared here and there, the torches of linkmen. The picturesque old gables that disappeared up in the darkness, the shadowy portals at their base, and the four and thirty streets, lanes, courts, and alleys (made the darker by the dull lamps at their entrances) that opened in the street intensified the mysterious aspect of the famous thoroughfare at night.

In the Temple Gardens the leaves had already fallen, and some of them were blowing about in Fleet Street while the watchmen were calling the hour. "Past ten o'clock and a cloudy night!"

It is not easy to-day, standing in the white glare of the electric light on the Embankment close by, to realise the long

muddy reaches of the river washing up to the arches of Somerset House ; nor in the midst of the rush of cabs and 'buses, the flash of gas and the perfect pavement of the street, to picture the strangely different characteristics of the same thoroughfare even at so modern a date as some seventy years ago.

A tall *outré* figure coming from the west passes under Temple Bar and disappears up a dimly-lighted passage, over which stands to this day the sign of the Cock. If you would try to understand the singular contrast of comfort and discomfort which contented our fathers, you may still find examples of the same in the narrow seats, steel forks, cobwebby ceilings, sanded floor, and honest homely fare and dainty punch at the Cock Tavern of to-day, which, denuded of the protecting shadows of Temple Bar, still hangs on to the fringes

of the past century, a sort of mouldy antique waiting to be packed away and forgotten except in books of history and novels of character.

The Cock Tavern, which its owner closed for a short time during the plague of 1665, still exists, and I ate a chop the other day where Pepys himself had partaken of lobster, and afterwards drank sack or sherries, and sang mighty merrily with his wife and Mrs. Pierce ; where Johnson and Goldsmith and Boswell have feasted ; and where, on this first frosty night of the autumn of this history, that swaggering, odd-looking figure we have just seen enter the portals under the golden bird carved by Gibbons stands within the radiance of the firelight waiting for the cunning, scoundrelly lawyer, who was as crooked in his ways as the spire that wriggled itself towards heaven as the landmark of the

once picturesque town of Chesterfield, in the hundred of Scarsdale.

"Is a gentleman named Mr. Simmons here?" asked Philip Scruton, though nobody would have recognized this gentleman as the heir to the Ellerbie titles and estates, whom a few days previously we had seen marching out of Chesterfield with the troops destined for active service in Spain. He had shaved off his luxuriant imperial; his moustaches were gone; all the sensuality of the man's mouth was exposed, and the hard lines of his jaw. He wore a curious dress, half foreign half English, and he was enveloped in a cloak which he threw aside as he recognized in a corner of the room his new ally, Mr. Septimus Dobbs, who was to be known here by an alias, while Scruton had no need to declare himself under any name whatever.

"I was waiting for you," said Dobbs,

at the same time making room for Scruton to sit by his side, "and if I hadn't heard your voice, I shouldn't have known you."

This was said in a whisper, though Dobbs and Scruton were alone at the extreme end of the room, and away from observation in the shadows that were deepened by the firelight and a few candles that were burning in one or two of the dark boxes where two or three noisy topers were discussing the exciting topics of the day.

Having been served with a bowl of steaming punch, the lawyer and Mr. Scruton resumed the confidences of their previous meeting on the night before the march of the three recruits.

"And how did you get to London?" asked Dobbs.

"By coach."

"Yes, yes; but how did you get out of the hands of the Kites and Plumes?"

"By stratagem."

"You are not in a good temper; take some more punch, sir."

"It is cold, and I lost some money at play."

"So soon? Why, you could only have reached London this morning, surely?"

"In time to make a new man of myself, as you see, and try the luck of your guineas."

"Ah, you are so extravagant!" said Dobbs; "but don't let a bit of bad fortune put you out of humour. Tell me, Mr. Scruton, how you managed to lay aside your obligations to the king."

"I settled with the sergeant on his own terms—a few of those bright guineas; and, to make North and Tom Bertram believe I was still going on, they were told that I

was transferred to another recruiting sergeant at Derby. They think I am in the 45th instead of here. As soon as they were well out of Mansfield I doffed my colours, went to the nearest tavern, dined, and waited for the coach that finally landed me at the Saracen's Head."

"Do you like this punch?"

"It is fit for the gods."

"Will you smoke?"

Mr. Dobbs pushed a pile of tobacco in a blue saucer towards his friend.

"Did Wingfield thoroughly understand that you were drafted into another regiment?"

"Yes, he approved of it. He was mighty glad to have us separated. North had shown his teeth once or twice, and the fighting would have begun before we got to the front if I had continued marching with that company."

"He has a proud stomach, that Mister North ; I never could endure the fellow," said Dobbs.

"Proud ! the cur, I'd have beaten him with a stick as I would a varlet in the street," said Mr. Scruton, helping himself liberally to the punch. "Wingfield told me he hoped to have the two lads, this North and that fellow Bertram, drafted into the Royals as efficient without the usual course of preliminary drill. If he couldn't do that, they were to go to the front, one as his servant, the other as the captain's. They were not going to be separated, at all events, Wingfield said, unless a stray bullet or two parted their company."

"Oh, young Wingfield would be able to have it his own way ; he seemed to be as much in command as the captain himself. Plenty of influence, sir ; do what he likes ;

father man of money and position ; Church and Army allied in that case. Wingfield will come home a general."

" Unless he is left behind a dead lieutenant. That fellow North I didn't think was so very hot to get on. Bertram was full of fight ; he'll get shot the very first opportunity, I should say."

" You must be killed too," said Dobbs.

" Oh, indeed ; and when ?" .

" In a month or two."

" Yes ; in what way ?"

" Fighting gallantly in a forlorn hope, or something of that kind."

" Where ?"

" In Spain, of course."

" Oh, I see that is one of your castles, eh ?"

" I shall not obtain a commission for you ; you will be killed as a private soldier ; it will be easier, can be done by a

newspaper report; have it put in the *Derby Mercury*; erect a tablet to your memory, if you like, in the old chapel at Brackenbury Towers; leave all that to me. You can come to life again when most convenient. In the meantime, you are your own master, as somebody else, to do what you like as somebody else, whenever you may consider the time opportune."

"Dobbs, you are the devil; you improve on evil designs and make the road easy for their accomplishment."

"I am an angel, you mean."

"With a tail," said Scruton.

"If Lord Ellerbie marries Susan Hardwick your chance of succession is at an end. She's no 'waster,' as they say down there; Brackenbury Towers won't want heirs when she's the Countess," said the coarse-minded conspirator, grinning.

"And you think she will be?"

“Sure!”

“I thought she liked that fellow North.”

“So she does, but she'll marry your uncle all the same.”

“Curse him! whether she does or not he's lived long enough,” said Scruton, looking fiercely at Dobbs, the liquor he had drunk rapidly beginning to mount to his brain.

“All heirs think that of the man who keeps them out; but it is pardonable in your case, for you have to live on my bounty now, the bounty of an inferior, and yet you are heir to vast estates, and the present owner turns you adrift and won't even pay your debts.”

“Damn him!” said Scruton, hoarsely; and then, pausing to look steadily at Dobbs —“and what is *your* game, Dobbs? You don't take this interest in me for nothing.”

“Revenge and money,” said Dobbs,

quietly. “ You know I hate old Hardwick. If I didn’t owe him a deadly grudge, he’s one of the men I would hang without a trial if I was a Judge Jeffreys and he was my prisoner.”

“ Yes, and the money?—so much for revenge, what for thy purse, old miser, eh?”

“ I’ll explain that in the morning.”

“ No, now, Septimus; let us understand each other, or I’ll grow my beard again, and go to Chesterfield.”

“ That would be your ruin; debtors’ gaols are not always easy to get away from.”

“ You would do that, would you?”

“ Not I, sir, not I,” said Dobbs, quickly; “ but Lord Ellerbie would have it done; perhaps Hardwick would arrange it.”

“ By St. Paul, I believe you! Well, what is our bargain, Croesus?”

“ You will assign to me, in return for

advances, the mortgages on the Hall, old Hardwick's place, and the mill, and certain other properties, should you ever come into possession."

The lawyer emphasized the last words, and said them slowly.

"Should I ever come into possession?" repeated Scruton, scornfully; "who says should I?"

"Not so loud, my lord," said Dobbs, "not so loud; let me call you my lord—it is like a foretaste of the good time, your lordship. Hi! waiter!"

"Your honour," answered the waiter from the other end of the room.

"More punch; and I want you to call a linkman and a coach."

"Yes, your honour."

"What are you going to do with a coach?" asked Scruton.

"Go to my inn."

"But not yet ; now listen, Fortunatus ! listen to me, old Money Bags ; attend now, d'ye hear, Satan ?" said Scruton, with a drunken familiarity.

"I hear, my lord," said Dobbs ; "your humble servant hears."

"Oh, you sly old fox ! Well, no matter. It shall be done. Will you go to mass with me in the morning ?"

"Mass !—yes, your lordship, if you wish it, though I am a Protestant, as you know."

"Ah ! ah ! ah !" roared Scruton, "you are the devil, I believe."

"Hush, hush, not so loud ; here's the punch."

Scruton helped himself to more punch while Dobbs paid the score.

Then Scruton with considerable difficulty filled another pipe, but instead of smoking it he laid it down.

"The plan is worthy of a diplomatist—

the devil is a diplomatist," he said ; " but how shall we justify it ? When the succession is anxious in Russia, the Czar dies conveniently."

"Russia will be the King's ally, depend upon it, soon," said Dobbs.

"Oh, you prophet ! you judge !" scornfully exclaimed Scruton, taking the bowl into his two hands and drinking wildly.

After a little while, when Scruton was more helpless in his legs than in his head, by reason of his deep potations, Dobbs and the waiter helped him to the hackney coach which was standing in the shadow of Temple Bar ; and half an hour afterwards he was fast asleep at a lodging which the waiter had recommended ; for Mr. Dobbs was careful not to take him to his inn.

The Hon. Philip Scruton slept more soundly than Mr. Septimus Dobbs, who

lay tossing about on the tall four-poster at the Holborn Inn that night. It was an unusual thing for him not to fall asleep almost as soon as his head rested on the pillow ; but to-night he was troubled.

“I have so many strings to my bow,” he said to himself, “that it is an anxious question which I shall pull, and when. That ribbon must fall into no hands but mine. It may be useful, it may not ; it may be desirable that she shall accept Lord Ellerbie ; she will hardly do so unless she thinks North is dead. Scruton is as fickle as water ; the announcement of the marriage as a coming event may be necessary to spur him on ; but the danger is that the marriage may take place. Well, let me see how I stand in that case. To be equal to either fortune, Septimus, is to make a safe book on the great race of life.”

Every phase of the trouble to come, of

which at the moment he seemed to be the central figure, presented itself to him.

“If Scruton is beaten,” he muttered, as he gradually fell into a dreamy sleep, “I lose on Revenge, but I win on Hardwick, blind and aged. Scruton first at the post, I win a fortune and trample on the Hardwick colours. I hedge Scruton with Susan; and it rests with me to nobble Hardwick, or pocket my feelings with my plunder.”

“Past twelve and a frosty morning!” cried the watch. Dobbs hugged himself with the consciousness of a double safety and comfort as he thought of the dangers of the London streets and the frosty air that was nipping and piercing the constable.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGER, YET A BROTHER.

Secret as the grave our Brotherhood,
Compact of oath and bloody vows.
Dark as night, our vengeance still
Is swift and sure as the gleam
Of God's artillery.

IT was not many days after the meeting of Dobbs and Scruton at the Cock that a learned private discussion took place between a stranger priest and a layman, after an early dinner at an alehouse on the Uxbridge road. The two gentlemen had met during a morning ride in Hyde Park,

and had made each other's acquaintance through some slight service of courtesy on the part of the priest (who was a foreigner, and not dressed up to his order), which the layman had answered by an invitation to extend the ride. In these days there were only a few detached houses north of the Uxbridge road, and what is now called Westbourne Grove and Paddington were green fields.

The landlord, honoured by distinguished guests and an order for the best he could provide, put the horses into the stable, showed the priest and layman to his best room ; and, to their surprise, after they had dined off a capon, produced a fine bottle of madeira and a dish of walnuts, over which the newly-acquainted guests chatted together freely.

"Since you converse so well in our language, and profess so little sympathy

with your native country, you are either acting to-day the part of a spy, or you are the most engaging and frank of English gentlemen," said the priest.

" You speak with the courage of a cosmopolitan and the observation of a travelled Jesuit," said the layman, holding his glass up to the light, that came into the room broken by diamond panes set in a leaden framework.

" Before I acknowledge your compliment, let me ask you how you discovered my sacred calling, since my occupation was peculiarly secular when I warned you of the puddle into which you were riding so thoughtlessly, and yet so full of thought, it seemed to me."

" Instinct and travel; the music of your voice, your broken English, your cropped hair, and your smug expression of face," said the layman, laughing.

"We bandy compliments like old friends," answered the priest. "When your countrymen have helped mine to drive the French out of Spain, I hope I may one day show my appreciation of your wit and this excellent repast."

The layman bowed. The priest made a sign as he put his glass to his lips. The layman responded with another, the priest with another, and then both looked at each other and simultaneously extended the right hand.

"Where did they elect you?" asked the priest.

"In Madrid," said the layman.

"And what have you done for the Pope? What for the temporal powers of the Church? What for the Brotherhood?"

"Little or nothing."

"That is bad."

"I was thinking how I might advance

our interests greatly in this country when I met you."

"Ah! an interposition, a miracle perhaps. You have a plan to advance Holy Church?"

"Not exactly a plan. You are a man of the world?"

"I wear this mask of coat and pantaloons because I am a man of the world, a diplomatist."

"Behind the mask you are a priest?"

"Yes."

"And besides that you are a Jesuit and a brother of the——"

"Your oath binds you not to name the society; it is enough that we understand each other."

"Blood for blood, an eye for an eye," said the layman.

"If the cause be thereby advanced," answered the priest.

"It is on record against me that I have not done all I should for the cause," said Scruton. "See how frank I am with you."

"With whom above all men should you be frank, unless with a brother?"

"Yet I knew one who used to live in fear of meeting a brother," said Scruton.

"He had disobeyed?"

"Grievously; yet was he always trying to atone. I saw him the day he marched for Spain a common soldier."

"An Englishman?"

"Yes, and not without great merit and also a man of family."

"Indeed. Say you so. You then had met him in Madrid—eh?"

"Yes; he fled before the Council of Three—fled to England—came to London, the true city of refuge."

"There is no refuge for a perjured brother," said the priest.

“Should this one return from the wars alive, escaping the Council and the French, he will no doubt submit himself and ask for reinstatement, and, if he do, I shall back his petition.”

“Nay, then, I would hold that should help him, if his insubordination be not beyond forgiveness.”

Let it be here understood that the present writer, the mere historian of these adventures, has no quarrel with any church or sect, and that he has no purpose to raise controversies or cast reflections upon his Roman Catholic neighbours in this narrative; though it will be seen, and he desires to acknowledge it in this place, that he founds this brief chapter upon *Pascal's Provincial Letters*. He is willing to have this phase of his romance considered pure fiction or otherwise as the reader may choose, always provided that the author

is acquitted of any intention to use theology or controversy except in the mere interest, dramatic and otherwise, of his story of those three recruits and that young officer of the King's who marched out of Chesterfield market-place, leaving behind them three girls whose fortunes and misfortunes are to form the staple interest of this narrative.

With this explanation we will now return to the gentlemen who are sitting over their wine in the alehouse overlooking the meadows beyond Hyde Park in the very earliest days of this busy century.

"Is it lawful to kill your enemy?" asks the layman, cracking a nut.

"In a duel?" responds the father, answering the question by an inquiry on his own account.

"No, by deliberate assassination, treach-

erously ? ” continues the other, looking up.

“ Learn from Escobar,” says the priest, steadily fixing the questioner with a steady eye. “ He provides special cases by special circumstances. For example, he who has received a blow is reputed without honour until he has killed his enemy ? ”

“ Is it right and lawful to kill beforehand one who intends to give us a blow, one who stabs us in our succession to property, to rank, to honour ? ”

“ Some of the learned fathers of the Church say the life of our neighbour is more precious than our honour ; besides, that it is cruelty to kill a man merely to avoid a blow. But others say it is lawful and even right when it cannot otherwise be avoided, for without that the honour of the innocent would be continually exposed to the malice of the insolent.”

“There is a certain man, who, being wealthy and old, palters with the Church ; he is of the faith, yet not ; he compromises with the times ; he gives to Protestant churches ; he even helps to build them ; he maintains one priest where he might keep a hundred ; he endows one chapel where he might endow twenty ; he has one heir, who waits patiently to succeed him—an heir true to the Church, a member of that noble band of whom you and I are brothers. He is old, yet doth he go on living ; and 'tis even his intention to marry a Protestant lady that he may have heirs to baffle the one patient existing heir, whom he treats vilely, committing him to debt and poverty.”

“He hath one claim upon the heir, their mutual faith.”

“If that heir came into the estates the Church would inherit too ; he would trans-

fer much to the society in Spain ; he would promote the work of temporal power here in this God-forsaken land," continues the layman.

" But," says the priest, as if he had not heard him, " Caramuel has laid it down that even a priest may kill a calumniator, a Jesuit, or Jansenist, and there are those which maintain that a son may even sacrifice a father, even as Jacob would have slain his son, if sufficient cause be found in the interest of heavenly things."

" The heir in question," rejoins the layman, with a grim smile, " is not the consummately rich man's son, but only a distant relation."

" In either case the argument holds good ; and, since we are only discussing supposititious instances, the controversial point is not affected," answers the priest,

cracking a nut and smiling significantly at his host.

“ There is, let us suppose, a tradition of this supposititious family that the last of the race shall die by his own hand or be killed by an assassin ; and, to appease the saint who laid it on the house, each bridegroom when he marries doth a penance at the tomb of the heretic lord who brought the curse upon the family. If for Holy Church, the reputation of the saint, the restoration of money to the Pope, and the furtherance of that order founded in Madrid, the heir slew him as he knelt, and thus anticipated the higher justice ; would that be lawful ? ”

“ It could assuredly be justified,” says the priest, “ if it were carried out with sufficient subtlety and skill to be accepted as suicide by the civil law, and as saintly vengeance by the local flock.”

"Ah," says the layman, "it is a pity that unfortunate heir is not now alive to step between that old enemy and his plans."

"Not alive!"

"No," answers the layman, "he is dead within this very week."

"*Dei plena sunt omnia!*" exclaims the priest, crossing himself.

"*Apropos* of what?" asks the layman.

"He has been saved what might after all have been a crime."

"How?"

"England is not Spain; they might have found him out and hanged him," says the priest, with just a spice of malice in the tone of his voice.

"Do you think so?" asks the layman, sarcastically.

"Yes, sir," says the priest, rising, and with a lowering expression of injured pride on his face; "and when you confess that

murder to the Church, let me advise you to be not less niggardly of your confidence than you are of your hospitality to the strange brother you met in your great lonely city, and who is content not to ask you whom you are, except his brother in that secret bond which does not permit him to question your motives, though it does not disguise from him the breach of our great rule of mutual trust and faith. Sir and brother, I take my leave ! We shall meet again!"

He drew himself up and made the three-fold sign of the secret order implying his office, its title to obedience, and the character of the oath that binds more particularly the lay brother.

The Hon. Philip Scruton, for he was the layman of this strange dialogue, rose, acknowledged the sign by its triple countersign, and bowed profoundly, yet not with-

out a certain tremor of anxiety, as his mysterious and angered guest left the room.

CHAPTER IX.

FOLLOWS THE ADVENTURES OF WINGFIELD,
BERTRAM, AND NORTH.

“To me,” Cuthullin replies, “pleasant is the noise of arms! Pleasant as the thunder of heaven before the shower of spring! But gather all the shining tribes, that I may view the sons of war! Let them move along the heath bright as the sunshine before a storm; when the west wind collects the clouds, and the oaks of Morven echo along the shore.”

OSSIAN.

WITH summer days, the scene of this romance of common lives and great must shift from the busy metropolis and the quiet streets and lanes and homesteads of Derbyshire to the red fields of war;

from the Rother to the Zadora ; from Brackenbury Towers to Murguia on the Bayas ; from the little town in the hundred of Scarsdale to the still more historic town of Vitoria in Spain ; from the fortunes of the Hardwicks, the Kirks, and the Ellerbies to those of Wingfield, North, and Bertram, whose destinies are mixed up not only with the girls they left behind them, but with certain old men whose shadows had fallen upon their lives and loves.

It is the night before the battle of Vitoria, June 20, 1813. Mr. Septimus Dobbs is at home, busy with his various webs. Mr. Scruton has been duly reported dead. His obituary has appeared in the county newspaper. Lord Ellerbie has gone into mourning for him, and those who are not his creditors in Chesterfield have tried to think of all his good qualities, the chief of which was that he could drink

as hard as anybody. Mr. Hardwick had spent a great deal of time at Brackenbury, and Lord Ellerbie occasionally visited the Hall. The Kirks had gathered in their harvest, sold their wheat, planted more, and were looking forward to the next crops. Mary had almost recovered her good spirits, though Theophilus Short gave her a fright now and then. Hardwick was jealous of Ellerbie's frequent calls at the Home Farm, and in all kinds of ingenious ways tried to influence Susan's views by hinting that the Ellerbie title and estates would go to Mary Kirk if she did not make up her mind to become the Countess. No news of Oliver North had reached Susan except through a letter which Mrs. Wingfield, the vicar's wife, had received from her son, in which a gallant but reckless act of bravery had been recounted in his favour. Two years had passed since the young fellows

marched out of the town. Oliver North had written to Susan, but his letters had been carefully intercepted by her high-minded and aristocratic father. She had half suspected this, and had more than once interrogated the letter-carrier ; but Mr. Hardwick had made his arrangements with Mr. Burns, the postmaster. This had been all the easier now that Jessie, the poor little postmistress, was no longer at his elbow to keep him straight, and give out the letters to the carrier herself. Jessie Burns, unable to face her neighbours, and borne down by the reproaches of her father, had disappeared with her child one dark autumn night, and they had searched for her in vain.

Such was the situation when the Muse of this particular history transports us, for the brief space occupied by this chapter, to Spain.

"Hot work to-morrow," said a brother officer, parting with Lieutenant Wingfield on the night before the battle of Vitoria, in the glorious summer of 1813.

Wingfield had been promoted for gallant conduct while leading a forlorn hope at Albuera.

"I suppose so," said Wingfield, who was lying on the grass outside his tent, and thinking of home ; hoping his father would be glad when he read his wilful son's name in the despatches that had gone to England ; wondering what had become of Jessie Burns ; and giving way to a sentiment of affection for her that had often strangely moved him in spite of his many flirtations with the beauties of Spain.

The sun was setting upon pickets and sentries, flashing here and there on burnished steel, upon tents and camp fires. The hum of voices, the strains of martial

music, the scream of Highland bagpipes, filled the air. The camp pulsated with expectation of battle. As a rule, young Wingfield would have been in the thick of any wild rejoicing or other hot-headed business that might be in progress. On this occasion he was, as he confessed to himself, suffering from "a fit of the blues." It was not fear; it was no sensation really connected with the coming combat; but a deep and sudden feeling of regret that whatever he might do or suffer would find no true and hearty response in the hearts of the only people, after all, whom he loved in the world. If his mother had been kept in ignorance of the way in which he had parted from his father, she would, it is true, watch the career of his regiment with a proud though fearful heart; but neither his father, nor the girl he had wronged, would feel that broad open pride

in him which was the kind of incentive to brave deeds that seemed to influence other men. Emily Manners, when she knew all, must despise him; Jessie Burns in her trouble might curse the hour he met her.

He shut his eyes and pictured to himself the Vicarage, with Phœbus, the low-voiced, soft-footed servitor attending upon the fine old parson. He heard the chimes of the parish church mingling with the drowsy sounds of Sunday mornings. He saw himself sitting in that little back parlour of the postmaster's house, and he recalled the music of the Wye in Miller's Dale. These reminiscences were full of pleasant incidents, but the pictures were blurred with the last ugly touches. "Ay, laddie, I'll just never cheer up again," he heard Jessie saying; "you ganging away to fight, and me with nae-body to say a kind word to me." Once or

twice before these things had occurred to him in solitary hours on the march, on picket duty, on the battle-field, but never to humble his pride as they did on this summer night. It might be, he thought, that he was a cup too low ; for at this moment he felt that he would give the world if he had the carpet of the magician that would transport him, simultaneous with the thought, wherever its owner wished. "If I had it," he said to himself, "I would go straight away and apologise to Emily Manners, and beg that fine old man, my father, to join Jessie's hand and mine : I could hug Sandy Burns himself at the thought of it !"

As he made this last remark almost aloud he rose to his feet. "Hang it, George," he said, "you are confoundedly hipped ! What's the matter, old man ?"

He went into a vine-covered cottage or

barn where most of his company were stationed, and found many of them, officers and men, taking parting drinks at a temporary canteen which had been run up near the enclosure. Tom Bertram was there, Sergeant Bertram now, with his left arm in a sling, “which I mean to chuck away, lads, in the morning ; you don’t catch me going about like a lame duck after to-night ; look at that !” He removed the sling and stretched out his arm, with a grimace as he spoke, turning pale with the pain when he vainly struggled to put it back again.

“ Ah, don’t be a fool, Tom,” said Oliver North, coming to his aid ; “ what is the good of torturing yourself ? The Colonel will let you go to the front fast enough, if you will.”

“ Will ! By Jove, I’m going, lad, if I have to crawl there ; I’m going to let those

frog-eating Frenchies have it to-morrow!"

"But you cannot bring your piece to the shoulder, sergeant," said Lieutenant Wingfield, who had entered at the moment.

Tom Bertram saluted his officer, snatched a musket from a pile near the doorway, and presented arms, suffering intense agony all the time.

"There, sir!" he said, "is that good enough?"

The lieutenant patted the brave fellow on the shoulder.

"Don't let them order me to the rear, sir," said Tom, appealingly. "I'm good enough for half a dozen of 'em to-morrow, if I only get my chance."

"You'll have it, sergeant," said the lieutenant, passing on. "Where is North?"

"Inside yonder, sir; I'll show you," said Tom, saluting again, and striding out

across a sort of garden to a shed where a number of soldiers were occupying themselves in various ways by the light of a fire and two or three pieces of candle. One was poring over an old copy of a Madrid Gazette, trying to see if he had learnt enough Spanish to make head or tail of it. Two others were gravely playing at Beggar my Neighbour. Several non-commissioned officers were writing letters. They had one pen and a small bottle of ink between them, and they were taking turns at the pen, writing letters home, or scrawling messages which they hoped to have forwarded to England if they fell.

In a corner of the room, with his flint musket and his coat lying behind him, sat Oliver North in his shirt-sleeves, sketching diagrams with a piece of rough charcoal on the table made out of a door propped upon extemporary tressels. Oliver's face was

illuminated by a lamp he had contrived with the lid of a tin box, filled with fat and oil, in which floated a bit of woollen from a French epaulette.

"Necessity is indeed the mother of invention," said Wingfield.

Private North did not hear him. He was designing curious disks that intersected each other in a mad sort of way—some flat, some horizontal, some looking like small cart-wheels that had been laid aside for want of axle-trees, some like children's hoops spinning away over them, some like grindstones, some like artillery wheels, some joined together with straps, some with flanges, some without, some open with spokes, some like Roman chariot-wheels—a medley of circles within circles, that looked like the mere accidental scrawls of a person whose mind was occupied with other things; and yet on close

observation there appeared to be a sort of method in the curious shapes.

"Private North! Attention!" said Lieutenant Wingfield, sharply, but with a smile.

North sprang to his feet and stood erect.

"Stand at ease!" said Wingfield, now laughing outright.

"Oh! it's you, is it?" said North, rubbing his eyes.

"Are you drawing a plan of to-morrow's fight?"

"No, sir, not to-morrow's," North answered, looking down at his work.

"Some other battle, the skirmish in which you fought like a Briton, and yet declare you would like to have run away from."

"No, another affair, a battle I commenced at Chesterfield."

"He's wandering," said Wingfield aside

to Bertram ; " has he had a crack on the head ?"

" No, he's got one of his inventing fits on, poor devil ! "

" Oh, I see ! Why don't you invent a new gun or a mortar, or something of that kind, Oliver ? "

" I want to save men, not to kill them," said North.

" That's a pretty sentiment for a soldier," said Wingfield.

" Yes; but there *is* one man I want to kill, and one only, and he is those silly Frenchmen's great Emperor ! Poor dupes, look at them after the fighting is over, writhing, groaning, their eyes bursting, lying pell-mell among our own dead and dying, all their enmity gone, a Highlander sharing his last drop of *eau de vie* with a French guardsman, a Spaniard binding up the wounds of a fellow who an hour before had burned to

thrust him through. Ah! Lieutenant, it's a pitiful bad business."

"Treason!" exclaimed Wingfield, "flat treason! And yet they say you drove your bayonet clean through the cuirassier who tried to lop Tom Bertram's arm off."

"He did," said Tom; "upon my soul he did, and the frog-eater screamed blue murder."

"Yes," said Oliver, thoughtfully, "but it is unsatisfactory kind of work. If it was not for the hope that I may get back to England and make a spinning model I have in my mind, I think I should have joined a forlorn hope long ago and got my head blown off."

"I thought I was hipped and queer tonight," said Wingfield, "but you have a fit of the spleen bitter enough for a whole regiment; so I'll go to my own quarters and try to find more cheerful friends there. I

wanted to shake hands with you both to-night for Auld Lang Syne ; it may be the last time we shall meet, it is to be a battle of giants to-morrow, in which the numbers will run up to a hundred and thirty or forty thousand men. Good night, lads, and God be with you, as my dear old father the Vicar would say."

Wingfield shook hands with the two men and strode out of the enclosure upon the open plain, where the shadowy hills could just be seen in the distance and the twinkling lights of the little town of Vitoria, a name destined to live long in the annals of military warfare.

" You are a queer, good-hearted, rum sort of a chap, Oliver," said Tom Bertram.

" I don't think much of myself, Tom."

" But the regiment does ; they say you'll be decorated for that affair at Neruda ; why

they donnat at least mak' a sergeant of thee
I cannot mak' out."

"If they'd let me go to the rear and
back to England," said Oliver, "that would
satisfy me."

"What! and leave your comrades, me
and the lieutenant!"

"I should feel sorry at that."

"Is it Miss Hardwick you want to get
back to?"

"She is one attraction: the other is a
model I want making."

"What! the spinning contrivance?"

"Yes."

"Well, it seems to me the rummest go
out! I could think of nowt else but fight-
ing if I were paid for it, and you think of
nowt but inventing all the time.. Eh, but
it beats cock-fighting, a chap making pic-
tures of factory wheels and things night
afore a battle."

"I had never intended to draw another design or make another pattern when I enlisted, Tom ; but since that parting with her at the last moment I've been torn by one hope ; to fit up that old broken mill with new machinery that will revolutionize the trade."

Oliver pushed his hair back, and first looked at his charcoal designs, and then at Tom, with flashing eyes as if he were talking of the capture of the entire French army.

"Well, well, lad, thou knows best. For my part, I've only one ambition—to do my duty to the King and keep up the owd character of Derbyshire for being in front when there's fighting to be done."

"No other ambition ?"

"No."

"Not to escape the misfortunes of the

war, go home a hero, and marry Mary Kirk?"

"Eh, lad, I durst not dream of that! As for a hero, I am going to do what I can; but marry Mary Kirk, there's no such luck as that."

"Don't despair, Tom! You said Miss Hardwick promised she would not forget you!"

"Yes, she did."

"Susan will not break her word."

"Eh, but she's a bonnie lady."

"She will keep her word, you'll see. There's one thing, Tom, I envy you."

"What's that, lad?"

"Your keepsake."

"What! the bit of bracelet Miss Hardwick gave me, because it was given to her by Mary Kirk? Eh, but it shows her to be good-hearted, thinking of me like that."

"I don't mean I would deprive you of it, Tom ; but I lost the ribbon my Susan let me take away, with the other things that were stolen when we embarked at Portsmouth. It was hardly worth robbing one for the trifles they looted, and to them the least valuable of the little bundle was a priceless treasure to me."

"Ah ! lad, I'm very sorry for thee ; this bit of metal's been a comfort to me. I made owd Pearson the blacksmith rivet it tight round my arm."

He turned up his sleeve as he spoke, and showed the trinket clasping his arm above the wrist.

"And *she* gave it to you ! It will be a charm that will see you safe through the war, Tom, I prophesy."

"Wouldn't have been much use that day at Neruda, if thy arm hadn't been wiry as thy eye is quick," said Tom. "I'd have

been dead as a herring but for thee."

"It's all a lottery, Tom, I fear."

"Then yonder Frenchmen you peppered drew a blank, I suppose. Well, let's hope a good many on 'em will have same sort of luck to-morrow."

It was but a brief respite of rest the troops had that night. Long before day-break Tom Bertram roused his comrade, who was sleeping as soundly, with his knapsack for a pillow, as if he had been lying in his comfortable chamber at Chesterfield. Oliver rubbed his eyes and hurriedly completed his very simple toilet. Drums were beating, bugles sounding. There was not yet a grey streak in the sky. It was a bright starlight summer morning.

"Uncase the colours, gentlemen!" Oliver heard Lieutenant Wingfield say, as he fell in under the eye of his sergeant, Bertram,

who had flung aside his sling. "Examine your flints!"

Oliver pulled himself together, looked to his musket, and presently moved off with the regiment, marching in companies, to take up ground for the first operation of the coming day.

Morning broke in mist and rain, through which the allied armies moved from their encampment near the Bayas, like ghostly battalions. Oliver had once seen something like this, one night while on picquet duty as a sentinel, when he had given the alarm only to discover that the supposed advancing hosts were trees and shrubs. But this ghostly-looking army of the 21st of June went forward with crash of drums and blare of trumpets, with bands playing martial airs; and, when the mist began to lift, the stirring picture gradually developed. At last the atmosphere cleared, as

if a curtain had been raised, and out blazed the summer sun—the same sun that was flashing in the windows of the Home Farm, upon the lake at Brackenbury, upon Nannie's cottage, upon the tiled roofs of the little Derbyshire town where the smoke was going up in tall blue columns to the blue sky. Many a mother was to become a widow, many a parent made childless, before that same sun sank at night blood red on the field of Vitoria.

When the bayonets of the moving hosts and the grey trappings of their chiefs flashed back the bright beams of the sun, the hills of Puebla showed puffs of smoke, and a rattle of musketry told that the fight had begun. It was a glorious sight to see the troops advancing over the plain below towards the enemy. Silken standards of every hue waved above the lines of British scarlet, the blue coats of the

Portuguese, and the brown of the Spanish, which seemed to act as a foil to the other colours—seventy thousand armed men on foot and on horse, passing along as if in review order, so steady were the lines, so elastic the tread of the infantry, so stately the advance of the mounted men and artillery. The plain

“ With arms is covered o'er,
The vale an iron harvest seems to yield,
Of thick-sprung lances in a waving field.
The polished steel gleams terribly from afar,
And every moment nearer shows the war.”

On the heights beyond the French watched the splendid show, themselves completing the picture, their line of blue and green and flashing brass and steel filling in the distance with colours that might have been a mocking miasma of those on the plain. Around Vitoria civilians, townspeople, camp-followers, a pic-

turesque mob had collected, spectators of the bloody fight.

Presently all eyes were turned in the direction of the hills about La Peubla, where those warning puffs of smoke had first been seen. A body of Highlanders were ordered up to support the Spanish, who had opened the hot day's work by an attack on the French position. Left and right the Battle of Vitoria had commenced.

Oliver North did not see this panorama of glory. He tramped on with his regiment amidst the cries of neighing steeds ; the inspiriting strains of "Rule Britannia;" the whistling of the fifes that told them they should return

"Safe back again

To the girls they left behind them ;"

the drone of bagpipes that screamed an

equally flattering tale to the kilted Highlanders; the clatter of accoutrements, the shouts of command, the lumbering of artillery, the calls of bugles and of drums.

"Oliver, my lad, we shall be in the thick of it in a minute," said Tom Bertram, as he passed his friend in a wheeling movement, "look to thyself, and God be with thee."

"Halt!" rang clear and shrill along the line the next moment, followed by the order, "With ball-cartridge prime and load!"

"Now, lads," said the commander, "steady! It is not Spain alone we are fighting for, but our hearths and homes. Think that these French murderers are at your own doors, and fire low."

The officer reined up his steed as if he was directing a royal salute, though the

action was becoming general, other regiments having already moved off at double quick, and received the word to charge.

"Present—Fire!" he exclaimed, and a flash of flame blazed out along the whole line, the front ranks kneeling to load while those behind kept up the hail of bullets that tore into the enemy.

And this was all Oliver remembered of the action ; for it seemed to him that after that there was neither system nor design in anything that was done, though the awful game was being played by the great Lord Wellington and the French General as carefully as if the men were ivory pieces and Vitoria a chess-board. Blinded with smoke and dirt, Oliver found himself hurried into the desperate conflict with the enemy, now surging this way, now that, now going forward, now back, over the

dead and the dying, a mad wild rage in his heart, his teeth set, his bayonet and musket reeking with blood.

“ Oliver ! The colours, lad, the colours !”
shouted Tom Bertram.

North only heard his own name, but he saw Bertram down, and a French soldier defending a standard, around which the whole battle-field seemed to be surging, though it was but one incident of the conflict. Oliver leaped forward in time to drive his bayonet through the devoted Frenchman, but not before Tom Bertram had rolled over, biting the dust, from a blow of the trooper’s sword. North seized the colours, and, catching the Frenchman’s weapon as he fell, dropped his musket, and the next moment was carried away from the spot by a desperate charge of the enemy. It was but for a moment that the British staggered under the weight that

came thundering against them. "At 'em, lads, like hell!" shouted young Wingfield, flying forward bareheaded, the blood trickling from his forehead, and a hoarse shout of triumph and admiration rising above the din as North, defending the captured colours, cut down at one blow a hardy officer who, with a cry of *Vive l'Empereur!* had made a dash for the eagle.

The raw soldier who deprecated war, and spent the night before the battle thinking over the invention of a new system of spinning, lived a charmed life in the awful conflict of the day, and was conspicuous in the eyes of more than one officer for his successful daring.

It was soon after the charge in which Oliver saw Wingfield for a moment leading his company (having succeeded to its command by the fall of his superior officer) that the fight seemed to slacken for a mo-

ment as if to give the troops time to cheer ; for the enemy was falling back all along the line, followed, after that long, loud, ringing cheer, pell-mell with the bayonet ; but many a time did the victorious regiments reel under the charge of cavalry ; and it was in one of these gallant efforts of gallant troops to retrieve disaster or make retreat safe that Oliver was carried insensible to the rear, whither the captured standard had preceded him.

As the sun went down on a victory which it was said no battle since John Sobieski drove the Mahomedan host from before the walls of Vienna had equalled, Oliver North found himself recovering from a kind of wild dream, lying upon the floor of a house, among many others who were groaning under the hands of a doctor, as the surgeon passed from one to the other examining their wounds.

"*You won't hurt,*" said the leech, feeling Oliver North's head, which ached keenly; "*give him some brandy.*"

An assistant handed Oliver a metal cup, from which he drank, and then sank back again, weak with pain and loss of blood, sickened at the sight which met his gaze. Realizing that his day's work had been no dream, he began to ponder over the fate of Wingfield and Bertram. Both must have fallen, he thought. Tom could hardly have risen again after the blow of the French standard-bearer, or, if he had, it could only be to meet death under the advancing feet of men and horses rushing back to the charge. Oliver was harder hit than the surgeon in his rapid rounds imagined. Later in the night, while the cavalry of the victorious allies were pursuing the enemy amidst blood and dust, along ground strewn with dead and dying,

encumbered with horses and weapons, blocked with abandoned guns, he was raving of home and boyish days.

When the news reached Chesterfield, the chronicles reported that Oliver North was killed while gallantly capturing a French eagle ; that Tom Bertram, seriously wounded, was recommended for promotion from the ranks ; and that Lieutenant George Wingfield's conspicuous bravery had been specially mentioned in the Commander-in-Chief's despatches.

A few months later, it was reported that North had been wounded, but not killed. Susan had made inquiries, and elicited this from the authorities. Still later, however, they had no record either of his removal from hospital or his death. The name of Tom Bertram, however, turned up again in the chronicles of the wounded and missing. Minus an eye, he was being nursed

by Sisters of Mercy, one of whom had written a letter for him to Farmer Kirk, in which he stated that Oliver North was killed. This bitter news had been endorsed in due course by the arrival of a packet addressed to Miss Hardwick from a "pore" returned "soljer," who said he had received it from a Spanish nun, who desired him to send it to her address, and gave him money to pay the postage from Dover, where he had just arrived. The packet contained the ribbon Oliver took from her dress on the day of his departure. "I was to rite he sent It with His Dying luve."

BOOK III.

DISCHARGED BY FATE.

Fate steals along with silent tread,
Found oftenest in what least we dread ;
Frowns in the storm with angry brow,
But in the sunshine strikes the blow.

COWPER.

CHAPTER I.

WEDDED, NOT MATED.

When I consider life, 'tis all a cheat ;
Yet fool'd with hope, men favour the deceit ;
Trust on, and think to-morrow will repay :
To-morrow's falser than the former day ;
Lies worse ; and while it says we shall be blest
With some new joys, cuts off what we possess'd.
Strange cozenage ! None would live past years again ;
Yet all hope pleasure in what yet remain ;
And from the dregs of life think to receive
What the first sprightly running could not give.

DRYDEN.

A SUNNY spring morning. The old market-place of Chesterfield looks as bright as a new guinea. Here and

there flags flutter in the breeze. Groups of idlers and gossips give unwonted life to the ends of streets and the openings of courts and passages.

In the Angel Yard, under an awning, tables are spread for all comers. Unlimited beef and beer gladden the general heart. In the centre of the market-place an ox is being roasted, and at night there is to be a grand display of fireworks.

Chesterfield, Grassmoor, and Brackenbury are this day to celebrate a wedding.

The rejoicings after Waterloo, and the peace festivities that followed them, are to be outdone on this occasion of local gaiety.

It is five years since the three recruits marched out of this same market-place, and three years since two of them and their commissioned comrade, George Wingfield, discussed love and war on the fatal eve of Vitoria.

The judicious landlord of the Angel is dispensing morning drams to early guests in the old-fashioned bar, assisted by Susan Jane, the pretty serving-maid, who has a pleasant word, and a witty one, too, for one and all. The windows and doors are wide open, for the weather is unusually warm, and the proverb, "Happy is the bride that the sun shines on," never had a finer chance of being completely tested.

"Do I think a wedding is a thing to thank Heaven for?" asks Susan Jane (it always has been the custom to recognize all the Christian names in the North), repeating the question of Dick Holmes, a local grocer; "that depends."

"What's it depend on?"

"Many things," says Jane, depositing his tankard of old ale upon the shining mahogany table.

"You can't all of you be countesses, 'cos we aren't all earls."

"And we can't all have oxen roasted," chimes in another early toper, a young tradesman who had just inherited his father's business, "and ride to church in a carriage and four."

"You haven't much opinion of yourselves if you think lasses only wed you because of your bit of money," says Susan Jane, jingling the glasses and pewter cups on the shelf above the bar, while the landlord sits smiling complacently in his arm-chair near the till.

"Nay, we are but nine-pins among you," says Dick Holmes; "you bowl us down just as you like. Fancy owd skin-flint Hardwick's daughter nabbing a title and ten thousand a year! They tell me Lord Ellerbie has settled that amount on her during her lifetime, and when he's gone

she'll come into everything unless there's children, and then the eldest lad, of course, will get the estates."

"Well," says the pretty serving-maid, tossing her coquettish head-dress, "I wouldn't have Lord Ellerbie if he were a prince and his hair was hung with diamonds."

"His wig, Susan Jane, his wig," interposed the young tradesman, amid a roar of laughter.

"Well, then, his wig!" says the girl.

"Wait till you're asked, Susan Jane," says the landlord. "Lord Ellerbie, my child, is a very fine old man."

"If you mean his clothes are fine, I dare-say; but, oh lord, did anybody ever see such shanks as he's gotten, and he totters like trembling grass in the fields; eh, but he gie's me the dithers to think on him."

"Envy, envy, Susan Jane," says the landlord.

"Nay, master, I none envy Miss Hardwick, and, if truth was known, she'd be glad enough to run away from the lot on 'em. She's none so proud of this day's doings, I'll be bound."

"Why not, Susan Jane?" asks Dick Holmes.

"She's sold herself for her father's sake," answers the girl.

"You mustn't say that, my child," observes the host. "Hush! What's that? Why, here's the London coach coming in. Heavens, how early it is! A good fifteen minutes, I'll swear, before its time."

There is the usual bustle of changing horses; but the passengers are few and the luggage scanty; two reasons why the coach has come in before its time. One passenger is a gaunt, travel-stained man,

with a light beard and moustache and long straggling brown hair. He has a military gait and manner, and carries a knapsack, with straps and accessories that indicate a habit of journeying on foot. He walks straight into the bar, flings his luggage down by the door, and sits upon the settle or bench in the snug ingle-nook. There is a fire burning in spite of the warm sunshine, and the stranger rubs his hands before it.

"Yet we don't think it cold," says the landlord, looking at him.

"No, no, I've been ill, and the air was keen sitting on the top of the coach," says the traveller.

"Will you take something to warm you?" asks Susan Jane.

"Thank you, I will."

"Some hot ale with ginger in it?"

"No; I have promised myself ever so

long ago that when I arrived here I would have a bottle of madeira. The Angel, they tell me, is celebrated for its madeira."

"Yes, truly," answers the landlord, with avidity, seeing in the stranger a better customer than he had at first expected. "I will get the wine for you myself."

Five years of comfort and indolence had told on the landlord since we saw him last. He is fat, and short of breath, and he puffs and blows as he returns with the wine, which he opens ceremoniously.

"Two glasses, please," says the stranger; "allow me."

He pours out one for himself, and one for the host.

"Your health, sir, and welcome to the Angel!" says the landlord.

"And yours," says the stranger. "Won't you sit?"

"Thank you," says the host.

Holmes and the other regard the stranger, curiously. Since Waterloo and the peace they have been in the habit of seeing odd people going to and fro. This new-comer makes a strange interesting appearance.

"Capital wine," he says, smacking his lips and stretching his legs.

"Yes, I flatter myself it is," replies the host. "Let me recommend a biscuit and a bit of old cheese. Susan Jane, the cheese."

The maid moves a small table towards the old "settle," as they called the seat in the ingle-nook, and the landlord asks permission for Holmes and the tradesman to join them."

"Very old?" asks the stranger, referring to the wine.

"So much so that I was advised to re-bottle it five years ago; the corks were

going. I put it into fresh bottles the very year them three recruits marched off for the Peninsula."

The latter remark is addressed to Holmes and the tradesman.

"Who were they?" asks the stranger.

"Well, sir," answers the landlord, "they were a rum lot altogether—though, mind you, brave young chaps as Derbyshire ever turned out food for powder."

"Yes?"

"Well, one was heir to a title and no end of money, the Hon. Philip Scruton."

"Indeed! And was he a private soldier, then?"

"Exactly; just a common recruit. I saw him march with the colours in his hat, a regular brick!"

"Did he distinguish himself?"

"He did so! And he extinguished

himself at the same time—at least, them French devils did it for him,” says the host, sipping his wine, while his two friends insist upon “sticking to” their old ale.

“Killed?” inquires the stranger.

“Dead as mutton; got peppered almost in his first engagement—a bit of a skirmish, an affair of outposts, as they say.”

“Poor fellow!”

“Well, I don’t know as anybody grieved after him, except his creditors; they hoped he’d pay them when he came into his money.”

“Ay!” says Dick Holmes, “Lord Ellerbie ought to pay them.”

“Perhaps he did,” answers the host, “but it can’t be denied as he cautioned every tradesman in Chesterfield not to trust him. A dead man pays all debts. He

owed me a score, but I wiped it out. I don't hold with making rows, and when a man's fought for his country, he's made amends for a good many drawbacks."

"That's true," says the stranger.

"But he was a scamp, that Scruton, I've always heard," says Holmes—"a sort of mongrel, half Spanish, half French, and only quarter English. I know my father used to say he was a spy, a Jacobin, and the devil knows what."

"Well, well," says the host, "he's gone, and it's not for us to be harsh on him. He's gotten a flourishing epitaph and a tablet in the old church, and another in the Ellerbie chapel at Brackenbury, and there let him rest."

"Who were the other two?" asks the stranger.

"The other recruits? Why, one was Tom Bertram, a fine young fellow, as used

to come here and have his glass and go into the French like a Briton, I can tell you."

"How did he get on?"

"Went right through the entire concern—Vitoria, Toulouse, Quatre Bras, Waterloo: he's been in Paris getting on for two years, but we shall have him home again soon Sergeant-Major Bertram; and they say he picked up a nice penny at Vitoria, looted out of the Frenchman's army chest, though he were left for dead on the field."

"And the other?"

"Mr. Oliver North, a sort of superior mechanic and inventor; a clever chap with his head and his hands, a gentleman in his way, and no more cut out for a soldier than I am."

"Was he so fat?" asks Dick Holmes.

"No, the opposite; he was spare, as you may say, not accustomed to sports of any

kind—never played bowls, never flung a quoit or a hammer, or rode a horse in his life, I'll be bound."

"Odd he should enlist?"

"Well, sir, he was an odd sort of a fellow, but, mind you, we ought never to judge by appearances. He fought like the very devil. He was wounded ; he was missing; he captured a standard. They put him in list of killed ; he came to life again. There never was such a hare-brained, reckless, fighting fellow. When it had been all settled as he were dead, they found him, it appears, being nursed in Spain by two Sisters of Mercy as does that kind of thing out there ; and then, just as he's ordered home, comes the news of Napoleon's escape from Elba, and the young chap is hurried into the thick of it again, to be killed in the Pyrenees."

"Killed, was he?"

"First report was 'missing,' second 'dead ;' and only t'other day there was an old soldier here as see him die."

"And how did he die?" asks the stranger.

"Oh ! like a soldier and a gentleman," replies the host.

"That's a comfort, anyhow," says the stranger to himself.

At this moment, shambling into the bar, came Mr. Septimus Dobbs, whose entrance was somewhat undignified, for he stumbled over the stranger's knapsack, and fell into the room, literally upon his nose.

A shout of laughter greeted this unwonted performance.

Mr. Dobbs rose, took out his handkerchief, wiped his face, and brushed his clothes.

"Laugh, my friends," he said, in his harsh, grating voice; "laugh away : but

somebody shall grin on the other side of his face for this."

He took up the knapsack.

"Whose is this? Whose offensive travelling bag is this? I don't want you to criminate yourselves all at once, but who owns this knapsack?"

"We don't know, Mr. Dobbs," said the landlord.

"A cautious answer, quite worthy of mine host of the Angel," rejoined Dobbs, examining the luggage.

"That is mine, sir," said the stranger, half reclining upon the seat by the fire, and yawning. "As you have picked it up, put it under my head. I'm going to have forty winks before I change my linen."

"You're mighty cool," said Dobbs.

"Not now; I'm quite warm and comfortable. Give me the pillow."

The host took the knapsack from Dobbs and placed it on the seat.

“Your name, sir! You have injured my pantaloons, barked my shin, hurt my nose, and most likely given me a black eye: either you or mine host must pay for your criminal carelessness. D’ye hear, sir?”

“Yes, Beelzebub.”

“Why, he knows him!” exclaimed Dick Holmes, laughing.

“I haven’t criminated myself, I hope?” said the stranger, slowly, and as if half asleep.

“Yes, you have; and you don’t tread on my corns for nothing,” Dobbs answered. “I’ll have your name and address, sir, depend upon it.”

“You’ll have my boot, if you interfere any further with my forty winks,” the stranger replied. “I’ll kick you from here

to the chapel at Brampton, where you insult your Maker, and where you frighten weak women with your ugly mug and your profane interpretations of the Testament."

"Mr. Dobbs, he *does* know you," remarked the host, smiling, while the guests burst into a fit of laughter.

"Very well," said Dobbs; "good morning; we'll see about this."

"Are you going? Don't go, sir," said the host.

"Good day; you shall hear from me again."

As he stalked out of the bar to take his liquor elsewhere, the stranger said,

"Really, Mr. Landlord, I'm tired out; I shall stay here to-night. I'm going to have a nap first!"

The bellringers of the old parish church began to raise the bells, trying one after

the other in preparation for a peal, which was the signal for the men in the bar and the inn yard to clear out into the market-place, for they knew the marriage ceremony was over and the wedding procession would soon be coming away, *en route* for the Catholic chapel at Brackenbury Towers, where the marriage ceremony of Lord Ellerbie's own church would be performed, following that of the Protestant rites under the crooked steeple of Chesterfield.

"Yes, sir, by all means," said the host; "you shall not be disturbed."

The stranger closed his eyes, and the landlord shut down the window.

"I never forgot a face yet," said the landlord to himself, as he looked hard and closely at his new guest, "and I seem to know this one."

The stranger opened his eyes in a dreamy

kind of way, closed them again, and presently was fast asleep.

"He *is* tired," said the landlord, walking softly to his own chair. "He's walked a long way as well as ridden, to judge by his boots; he knows Dobbs well, that's certain; it's a curious world. Ah! there go the bells."

Out clashed the metal tongues, one after the other, beating the sunny air with their merry blows, starting musical waves upon the wind. Flags and banners seemed to have a new decorative motive. They fluttered from flag-poles, they rippled from chamber windows. Crowds of people swayed to and fro in the churchyard, trampling on the dead, using points of vantage on tombs and gravestones, and blocking up every pathway. In St. Mary's Gate horses were prancing, postilions decorated with wedding favours were cracking their whips.

Susan Hardwick had met her father with a calm face that morning when he came to conduct her to the carriage, and as they had driven to church he had thanked her again and again for being so dutiful and good.

Mary Kirk had bantered her on the realization of her own prophecy three years before, when they had visited Brackenbury Towers together.

“Your ladyship,” Mary had called her, as she kissed her and admired her lovely satin dress, when the marriage toilette was completed, “you look like an angel, only lovelier.”

“Ah! Mary, if you could read my heart!”

“I can, my dearest friend, I can!”

“What do you read?”

“Oh! I don’t know—kindness and goodness, and the intention not to let it make any difference to me or anybody

when you are a Countess, except that you will be kinder still if possible."

"Ah ! Mary," she sighed.

"Well, dear, what is it ?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"Cheer up, your ladyship, cheer up."

"Don't say that, Mary ; that is what my father says ; he means it—you only say it in fun to rally me and to cheer me, to make me forget my husband that is to be in my title that will be."

"Nay, Susan, believe me, I think Lord Ellerbie most kind, and you are envied by all the ladies in the county, hated by half the mothers."

"He is kind—yes, he is kind," she said, and then, bursting into tears, she exclaimed, looking upwards, "Oh, mother ! look down upon me and bless me : for I am to-day sacrificing myself to your dying command and to my father's need."

"Susan, don't go on like that!" Mary had exclaimed, in terror. "People will see you've been crying, and that will make the envious glad."

"I am better now," she said.

"I should hope so! Lord bless me! To think of a girl crying when to-morrow she'll have a fortune, a family set of diamonds, a coach that was made in Paris, a maid, a 'boodor,' and be entitled to go to Court and have people bobbing before her and saying, 'Yes, your ladyship; Yes, countess; By your leave, my lady.'"

The rural damsel curtsied and smiled, and bent her pretty head, catching glimpses of herself all the time in a mirror, until Susan herself was fain to smile and kiss her.

"That's better," said Mary; "now we shall get along."

Never was bridesmaid more efficient

than Mary Kirk; never did admiring crowds of wedding guests gaze on brighter eyes or upon a more bewitching figure. She shared with Susan the glory of the day in so far as attractiveness and interest were concerned.

There were six bridesmaids. Mary was the prettiest of them all. It would have driven Tom Bertram mad with admiration of her could he have seen her as she was now, a woman, all the budding youthful charms he remembered, in full bloom. Her soft violet eyes, her parted lips, her ample bust, her fair yet rosy complexion, her rich sunny-brown hair; Mary Kirk was a type of perfect English beauty. She, as did her five companions, wore a walking-dress of thick white muslin made low in front, with a soft crape or sarcenet tucker, the sleeves short and looped up on the top of the arm; a light blue sarcenet

cloak, ornamented with deep white lace; white satin shoes, and a white chip hat trimmed with lilies and forget-me-nots.

The bride wore a robe and train of white satin, embroidered all round with a running border of gimp, in which here and there were deftly set pearls and diamonds, the body of the robe made low, and a lace tucker drawn over the bosom. From a wreath of orange-blossoms there fell over Susan's delicate figure an ample veil of costly lace, and you could not fail to notice how shapely her feet and ankles were despite her pointed satin shoes. No woman had a more graceful carriage than Susan. She looked every inch a countess as she stood by the altar in the old church, with its tall pews, its coloured glass, and its great flashing chandeliers. It was a gay procession as it came streaming out of the church to the pealing of the

organ and the ringing of the bells. Old Ellerbie, in his satin coat and silk stockings, his jewelled shoes and his orders, looked proud of his bride, who leaned upon his arm—nymph and satyr. Mr. William Hardwick posed and strutted in his plum-coloured velvet and gold lace; and whenever the crowd cheered he took all the honour to himself, and bowed with condescending affability.

“The old fox!” exclaimed Nannie Dawson, standing on a gravestone and looking at the show through her spectacles, “he’s got his innings at last.”

How the bells clashed! They seemed to shake the stupid old steeple. It looked as tottery as Lord Ellerbie and as crooked as his father-in-law.

Presently the first carriage got away, then the second, and the third, and so on

until St. Mary's Gate echoed with the clatter of the horses' hoofs.

"As if once wasn't enough to tie such an ugly knot," said Nannie Dawson. "Eh, but they've got her fast enough; she's a proud un, too; and old Ellerbie's fond enough now, and will be for a week; but he breaks all their hearts, 'cos there's no children, the old fool! Well, I towd her as I should see her married to him, and I have."

You would have thought the bells had gone mad if you have heard them ring—mad with a wild joy. If poor Tom Bertram, who loved Mary Kirk with a first devoted passion, had just been married to that dear girl, the bells could not have been more jubilant. The reason for this extra vigour on the part of the human machines that pulled the ropes was not

sentimental. It lay in the prosaic fact that they usually rang the bells on beer. To-day they had been supplied with rum punch, blazing hot. They were so many Quasimodos at work in consequence, and they shouted and screamed with laughter as they pulled the ropes.

What a ringing it was! Peal upon peal, "triple bob majors," and all kinds of tintinnabulary commotion was going on up in that strange belfry, shaking that strange steeple, with its defiant figure of chanticleer away up in the sky as if it crowed defiance to the sun.

Susan Jane had returned to her duties in the Angel bar by this time, and the host had gone out to superintend the roasting of the ox, the fire for which was sending up a long column of smoke like an aërial wreath.

The stranger in the ingle-nook opened

his eyes, stretched his legs, and rose to his feet.

“ Ah !” he said, “ joy bells. What’s the occasion ? My return ? No, that’s too vain a thought. No one can have dreamt of it yet, since, according to the report they give me, I was killed nearly three years ago.”

“ Would you like to see your room, sir ?” asked the maid.

“ What’s the merry-making, pretty one ?” he asked.

“ A wedding, sir,” she said.

“ I give them joy,” he answered ; “ the bells shall soon ring for another wedding.”

“ Yours, sir ?” she said, looking archly up into his face.

“ Yes, mine,” he said, chucking her under the chin.

“ I wish *you* joy, sir,” said the girl.

The stranger was Oliver North. He smiled at the little waiting-maid, and as she called the boots to carry his luggage to No. 14, he looked into the fire thoughtfully, listening to the bells and discounting his dearest hopes.

CHAPTER II.

MAY AND DECEMBER.

“ Oh, no, we never mention him, his name is never heard ;
My lips are now forbid to speak that once familiar word ;
From sport to sport they hurry me, to banish my regret ;
And when they win a smile from me, they think that I forget.”

THOMAS HAYNES BAYLEY.

SPRING seemed to smile upon that wedding procession. But it brought no joy to the fair young bride. She sat with her hand in her husband’s as their coach trundled over the road to Brackenbury Towers.

Here and there along the route flags were still flying, though they had left the town far behind them. The country was green and beautiful. The alder trees in the hedges were putting forth pendulous welcomes to the spring. It was but the end of March, and yet the trees were bursting into bronzed buds of leafy promise. The stormy month was going out like the lamb. It was a day on which nature seemed to whisper hope.

As the carriages wound along the road, looking in the distance like a party-coloured ribbon flashing among the budding hedgerows, ploughmen paused to gaze, and flocks of rooks, earning their living in the newly-turned furrows, set up noisy cries. The lark was singing aloft at the very gates of heaven. A blue sky covered the busy landscape.

Lady Ellerbie sat with her hand in her

husband's. The sky might have been dull as lead, the fair Derbyshire hills and dales a wilderness, for aught she cared. Indeed, she would have preferred gloom and storm; for the sunshine only seemed a reproach to her, the voices of birds mocking voices, the hopeful lesson of the new buds a rebuke. She had promised to love, honour, and obey a man whom she did not even respect. Her hand had not given away her heart in that solemn surrendering of herself to a master. The veriest slave in a Stamboul market of old was not more a purchase than she was. Lord Ellerbie had bought her; bought her and paid for her.

"You must try to like me very much," said the Earl, as the carriage went slowly up hill. "Yes, yes, I shall do all I can to make you happy."

"Thank you, sir," she answered, her

hand, though he pressed it, lying cold and immovable in his.

“Not ‘sir,’ my dear, not ‘sir,’” he said.

“I beg your pardon, what then?”

“Richard—call me Richard.”

“Always?”

“Yes, certainly; why not?—I shall call you Susan.”

“You are very good. I like to be called Susan.”

“Very well. Gad’s life! you need only tell me what you like to be sure I shall not forget it; your wish shall be a command, only take the trouble to express it.”

“Thank you.”

He raised her hand to his lips. She let him. She did not move a finger. She spoke in a calm, monotonous tone.

“You must try to forget that I am ever so much older than you, won’t you—eh? You will, eh?”

"Yes; I will try."

"That's well said; and if you try, you will succeed. I am sure you will, I have such a surprise for you.'

"Yes?"

"You know the cage in the little menagerie at Brackenbury, the one you said ought to be filled with parrots?"

"The cage near the wolf?"

"Yes. Ah! you do remember it, then? That's good of you. Well, there are a score of parrots in it, if there is one."

"Indeed?"

"And the day your father brought you to see the grounds, you thought the Dutch flower-beds and the maze would make a winter-garden?"

"Did I?"

"Yes, and it is a winter-garden; and the little room where the Queen of Scots used to do embroidery has been furnished;

your father said you had expressed an opinion that it should be."

"Did he?"

"Yes, when you were talking about the Towers at home. Well, it is the delightfulest room now. Yes, yes, I feel sure you will say so."

"Oh, Lord Ellerbie," said Susan, suddenly, "don't think me ungrateful; you are very kind."

"My dearest, I love you," said the old man, his voice trembling. "I love you as I never loved before."

Susan shrank from him.

"I am an old man, they say. Don't believe it. My heart is young, and, bless me! the proverb that says it is better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave is full of wisdom."

Lady Ellerbie resumed her former calm, firm manner.

"How long a time will this second ceremony occupy?"

"An hour, not more. Father Busby is the priest, a kindly, good man. Yes, I hope you will be great friends with him; he is learned in many things."

"And then we return to the Hall?"

"To breakfast, yes; I hope they will cut their speeches short. You will go back in your father's company. Does that please you?"

"No."

"Gad's life! that's well said. He would have had you wait; but Dobbs, my steward, will accompany me. That will give you an opportunity to rest yourself a little after the morning's excitement, and have a talk with pretty Mary Kirk, eh? that pleases you?"

"Yes."

"I knew it would, that is why I arranged it so."

"It was kind of you."

"Nay, I will not take too much credit for it. You know the ancient custom of our house? No. Ah! it will interest you anon to read about the grand old men and women of the past, the great ladies whom you succeed as Countess of Ellerbie, and all of whom you outshine."

"Would I were worthy the succession."

"Worthy! There has never been so lovely a Countess of Ellerbie as you, Susan."

"It was an ancient custom you spoke of?"

"Yes, a religious exercise, a tribute to the past. An Ellerbie bridegroom goes straight from the altar to meditate and pray at the tomb of an ancestor—a sort of penance. But your father told you of it?"

"Yes, I had forgotten it. And so the moment we are really man and wife you leave me?"

Though she was glad of it, she could not resist the opportunity to be sarcastic, which surely boded ill for the poor old man's future peace.

"Are you sorry? Say you are sorry!" said the Earl, quickly, and patting her gloved and motionless hand.

"Will you be long?"

"An hour, not more—time for you to reach home and talk to Mary Kirk and dress for breakfast."

"I do not dress for breakfast."

"I have a great mind, gad's life I have, not to leave you, but Father Busby would have a fit, I believe, if I neglected one iota of the ancient custom."

"Nay, my lord, I would not have you do so."

"Not 'my lord'—Richard, my dearest, Richard."

"Richard," she said.

"Ah! it is like uncorking a bottle of red-seal madeira, the sound of Richard in your sweet mouth."

"The simile is not flattering."

"Gad's life! your father says that wine is distilled gold."

"Then it must be good indeed. I withdraw my objection to the simile."

How hard she tried to conquer the cold aching sensation that clung about her heart!

"Tut, tut, don't do anything of the kind. Rate me soundly if you have a mind to, I shall not complain." He kissed her glove.

The summit of the hill was reached. The carriage jolted on again, and Susan settled herself down in her corner, plainly intimating that she wished that there

should be no more talking. Lord Ellerbie subsided accordingly.

A panorama of hedges and trees and meadows seemed to be passing the windows. Here and there lambs were playing in shady corners of green fields. Once upon a time how gratefully Susan would have taken in all the lovely scene.

When she was passing the Home Farm, and the towers of Brackenbury rose up among the trees down in the valley, her mind wandered back to that day when she sought refuge for her troubled thoughts among the Kirk family after that passionate parting with Oliver North, and her confession of the sweet secret of her heart.

“ You are crying,” said Lord Ellerbie, as the carriage left the highway and entered the road leading to Brackenbury.

“ Forgive me,” she answered, looking him in the face for the first time during the morning.

It was an appealing, sorrowful, almost a tender look, and she returned the pressure of his hand. It was a sort of solemn comfort to her soon afterwards to know that she had done so, to feel that she had spoken kindly to him.

CHAPTER III.

THE UNBIDDEN GUEST.

So boldly he entered the Netherby hall,
Among bridesmen and kinsmen, and brothers and all.
Then spake the bride's father, his hand on his sword
(For the poor craven bridegroom said never a word),
“O come ye in peace, or come ye in war,
Or to dance at our bridal, young Lord Lochinvar?”

Scott.

A DJOINING the unused and semi-ruinous apartments once occupied by Mary Queen of Scots at Brackenbury Towers was the mysterious old chapel or mausoleum of the Ellerbies, containing the tomb at whose crumbling shrine the male

members of the race had been accustomed, time out of mind, to offer up special prayers on their wedding morn for the extension of the family line. The object of this solemn communing with heaven in presence of the dead was more particularly directed to the indefinite adjournment of the fulfilment of the tradition that the last of the race should come to a violent ending.

Some shrewd Churchman of the olden days had probably invented this so-called “ordination of Providence” and Fate to terrify one of the ancient heads of the family into matrimony. Intrigue against the freedom of some woman-hating bachelor of the house had conjured up the legend, and at the same time established the virtues of the tomb at which tradition claimed homage, though beneath the curious effigy thereon were supposed to lie the remains

of a heretic lord, who had died under the ban of the Church.

It was the ghost of this poor anathematized knight which was supposed to haunt Brackenbury Towers by night and day, the unhappy spirit being unable to rest under the trouble the Church had laid upon it. Probably the apparent truth of the fable was maintained in the district through mortal means; for modern spiritualism itself had no more complete arrangements for ghostly manifestations than those connected with the chapel of the Ellerbie tomb. Under the stained glass window that dimly lighted it, let into the wall, was a slab with a brass figure of a man in armour, with a long sword, and at his feet a helmet and a half-obliterated inscription, upon which the other day one of the learned societies of London held a long discussion, but without

making head or tale of its meaning. Those who carved the letters knew well enough what it meant, and so did Philip Scruton. They were the key to the vault and passage beneath, the former being a cell some few feet wide, and ample enough for a person to move about in, and the latter communicating with an old tower or temple, which had long been used as a boathouse on the reed-margined lake.

While the bells of Chesterfield Church were shaking the crooked steeple and stirring the hopeful imagination of the returned soldier, Captain Oliver North, a man dressed as a Jew pedlar emerged from this ancient hiding-place, and surveyed the little chapel in the centre of which was the tomb of the baleful knight, sculptured in complete armour, but with hands and feet broken off and head much mutilated. With the entrance of the mys-

terious visitor there came into the place, not the odour of sanctity, but a mouldy kind of exhalation from the vault, as if the chapel had been closed for many a long year, as no doubt it had.

"Thank the saints for a little fresh air," muttered the man, as he stood erect and surveyed the scene with a critical eye. He examined the door which led to the larger edifice, where the second ceremony of marriage was to be performed. There was a grim, stern, determined expression on his swarthy face.

While he stood contemplating the tomb, footsteps were heard in the distance, and he retired to his hiding-place, closing behind him the heavy stone door, supposed to be the memorial of a dead knight, which swung into its place without a sound. It was a work of notable skill, this strange doorway. It seemed to have

been hung as deftly as that of a modern iron safe, and it moved in a similarly silent fashion of ponderosity.

A priest and a servant entered through the ordinary doorway, which opened into a sort of small ante-room leading to the other chapel. The servant carried a *prie-dieu*, which at the priest's direction he placed by the side of the tomb. This done, the servant, imitating the priest, crossed himself, and they left as silently as they came.

Soon afterwards the memorial brass, with its undeciphered inscription, moved again, and the man in hiding came cautiously forth. Looking first at the *prie-dieu*, then at the vaulted passage, and finally at the tomb, he took up the article of furniture and placed it so that any person kneeling in it should have his or her back to the secret passage.

"No, no, Father Busby," he whispered to himself, "we must place it where it will be most convenient. Besides, I want to keep my door on the jar, so that I shall hear my sanctimonious Blue Beard come and try once more to cheat his patient and natural heir."

He disappeared again, and it was fully an hour afterwards before the subdued strains of the small organ could be heard and the voices of the choir in the second marriage service of the day.

And now the last notes of a triumphal march are heard echoing away in the distance as the door is opened, and Father Busby enters, preceding Lord Ellerbie in his wedding garments. The priest, in solemn terms, repeats the tradition of the house and the time-honoured custom of the practice of special meditation and prayer on the occasion of the sacrament of matri-

mony. His reverence crossed himself twice when he observed that the *prie-dieu* had been moved.

"Wait for me, good father, in the chapel," said the Earl, who, though this was his third ceremonial visit to the tomb of the baleful knight, felt on this occasion a strange chill of dread take possession of him.

"I will," said Father Busby.

"My steward Dobbs will accompany me to the Hall when this solemn hour has sped."

"They do not wait for your Grace?"

"I ordered it so that the Countess may have some privacy and rest before we enter together the apartment where our good Hardwick has had the feast spread that we are to partake of in his house before we come to Brackenbury Towers."

"You are always thoughtful for others," said the priest, as he left the chapel of the tomb.

In the meantime the gay cavalcade was flashing through lanes and highways on its return to Chesterfield, presently to clatter along Ludsmill Street and pull up at the Hall, the residence of the now more than ever haughty Hardwick, who had even lost so much of his discretion as to give Septimus Dobbs serious cause to look out for an opportunity of humiliating him.

A select number of guests had been invited to the wedding-breakfast, which was spread in the dining-room. The guests were received in the spacious hall which opened upon the drawing and morning-rooms and library. This suite of apartments, newly decorated and furnished, had been thrown open, and wine and coffee and strong waters were being

handed about to the guests as they came in to refresh themselves after the excitement of the morning, and fortify them for the repast that was to come. These were Mr. Hardwick's orders to his butler and his servants. His notion was to be wildly lavish, to literally drown the day in wine, and make the envious town of Chesterfield drunk with alcoholic joy.

"Your ladyship is sad," he said to Susan, when they were alone in her boudoir, where he had found her shortly after the return from Brackenbury.

She had begged to be left to herself for a few moments. Even Mary Kirk had been excluded. But her father had been on the watch so long now to fortify the dear child against any undue exhibition of feeling, that he insisted upon going into the room. Besides, he had to consult her upon some little matters of detail concern-

ing certain questions of precedence in regard to the pairing of the guests for breakfast. At all events, that was his excuse to Mary Kirk, who had promised Susan she should not be disturbed.

"I wish you would not call me your ladyship, father," said Susan, wearily.

She was sitting upon a couch, her arms hanging listlessly by her side, her veil pushed away from her face, which was almost as pale as her dress.

"But you are your ladyship, my darling, and I want you to remember that you are a countess. I want you, my dear, to realise fully what your marriage gives you—a title, wealth, power," said Hardwick, pursing up his lips and taking her hand.

"Yes, dear, I know," she replied, "and pleasure to you, father; this marriage is proof of my love for my mother, my

veneration for her word and her memory,
my devotion to you."

"My dear, but consider this marriage is
an example of—"

"Filial duty," said Susan, interrupting
him, and speaking with a sudden and un-
looked for vigour. "It tells you that you
have a dutiful daughter, who has preferred
your happiness to her own. You have
had trouble enough, father, I grant you,
even to feeling the very pinch of poverty—
nay, don't deny it."

"I do not, I do not; but it is very hard
to be reminded of it in this way, and at
this time," he said, whimpering.

"I will not remind you of it again," she
said, rising to her feet and responding to
his embrace.

"That's right; then be cheerful, love, be
cheerful; in half an hour's time your hus-
band will be here to take you in to break-

fast, and seat you at his right hand. I will now go and join our guests. I could not resist coming to cheer you."

"Be cheerful!" she said, as she resumed her seat. "I wish I could if only for your sake."

Then, looking upwards, and raising her hands in an attitude of prayer, she exclaimed,

"Oh! Oliver, if your sweet spirit looks down upon me in this supreme hour of misery, forgive me! I could not see my father ruined, a dependent on this selfish lord, a thing to be trodden on even by his steward, mocked at by his creditors, to die wretchedly, perhaps by his own hand. But, oh! great heavens! the weight of woe I carry is hard to bear."

"Susan! Susan!" exclaimed Mary Kirk, rushing in, "hide yourself! I thought it was his ghost. It isn't; he was

on the stair following me before I saw him. I ran that moment ; he knew where I was coming. Oh ! dear, I shall faint !”

With this hurried and seemingly inconsequential statement, Mary Kirk flung herself into Susan’s arms, and Oliver North walked into the room. He had shaved himself, and was dressed as nearly like his former state as possible ; but that he looked at least ten years older, and was bronzed with hard weather, he was but little changed.

“ Oliver !” gasped Susan, putting Mary Kirk aside, “ Oliver North !” She did not scream. She stood transfixed, looking at him, her hands raised, her figure rigid.

“ Yes. Oliver North !” he said, his lip quivering.

“ Oliver !” she said again. “ Oliver North !”

"You repeat my name as if it was a half-forgotten memory," he said. "Oh, my God! To meet you thus. When they told me I wouldn't believe it. I came to see for myself. Oh, Susan! And I have been praying for this meeting again continually."

"They told me you were dead!" she said, still gazing in a vacant, dreamy way into his face, her form fixed and rigid as a statue. "Oliver! Oliver North!"

Mary Kirk sat with her face in her hands.

"*They* told you! What did your heart tell you?"

"Yes, speak like that," she said, moving for the first time since he had entered the room, "speak bitterly; my heart—my heart told me you lived!"

"And yet," he said, "you—"

"Had not strength of love and hope and

faith to uphold the secret promptings of my poor fickle nature. They told me you were dead, and I saw you in my dreams—dead—dead!"

"Would I had been, ere I should see you thus!" he cried.

"Oh! Oliver, if you could know what music there would have been for me in your dear voice but a few short hours ago, you would pity me now!"

She staggered; he moved towards her.

"Nay, do not touch me. I am not worthy to be the object even of a scandal associated with your name, poor wretch that I am! Go, sir, leave me to my fate."

She clung to a chair for support. Mary Kirk came to her aid.

"Yes, yes, Mr. North, leave us. You have come too late. It is not her fault. If you were alive, why didn't you let her know?"

"I did. Yes, by heaven, I did!" he exclaimed, as if the fact that he had written to her continually had only that moment dawned upon him.

"How?" asked Mary.

"It is not three months since I sent her my last letter, and I told her I was then on my way home."

"Well, you've made a nice bungle of it some way. I don't pretend to understand it," said Mary, "but you've been dead in Chesterfield this two years and more."

Susan looked vaguely from North to Mary, and from Mary to North.

"As long as that?" Oliver asked, with a puzzled air. "Are we all dreaming, or am I the only one who thinks this is reality, while it is only delirium?"

"No, we are not dreaming," said Mary, putting her arm round Susan's waist—"nothing of the kind. We had your mes-

sage when you died, your love, and all that, and there was your comrade here who saw you do it. There, go away, Mr. North, it's no good playing tricks on us."

"Tricks!" said North. He hardly knew what he said.

"I thought you were your own ghost, but I see you're not; this lady is now the Countess of Ellerbie, and you had better go away. Perhaps you meant to surprise her, and you have; but I don't see that there is anything to be proud of about it. Come, Susan; come, my lady; come to your room."

Susan suffered herself to be led away. She left the room with the quiet submissiveness of a child. She looked blankly at North as she passed him. He stood gazing after her as she went, and then at the open doorway where she had disappeared.

"Great heavens!" he said, presently, raising his hand threateningly aloft, "we are the victims of some black conspiracy. No, Oliver, you shall not go tamely away and leave her to her fate without a word or a blow!"

He rushed downstairs. The first person he saw was old Hardwick. He was in the midst of a group of gentlemen in the morning-room. There was a rustle of silks and a pleasant chatter of women's voices in the rooms beyond. Oliver took in at a glance the changed aspect of the place—its pretentiousness, its ostentation of wealth—and it was as if by a stroke of inspiration that the method of the conspiracy which had robbed him of Susan seemed to be made plain to him. They had intercepted his letters, and had given her some cunning proofs of his death.

"What! what!" exclaimed Mr. William Rutland Hardwick—"whom do I see? Gentlemen, excuse me."

The group which had surrounded Hardwick broke up and made way for him.

"Sir," he said, addressing North, "I did not invite you to come here."

"No, you did not," replied North, "and yet you did not seem so much surprised to see me as your daughter did."

"What! what!" said Hardwick, stammering; "you have not dared to——"

"She thought I was dead; you *knew* I was not."

"This is not the place nor the time for an attack of this kind," said Hardwick. Turning round to his friends, "Gentlemen, you will not see me insulted, I am sure, and on this day above all others?"

Several men stepped towards North in a threatening manner.

“Gentlemen, pardon me. I am an officer in His Majesty’s army, and shall know how to resent any interference between this old man and myself. I have been sick and a prisoner, and reported dead. My name is Oliver North, and I have great reason to ask for an explanation of this day’s business.”

The self-possessed and gentlemanlike way in which North delivered himself impressed the company; and Hardwick now pulled himself together for a diplomatic triumph, seeing that it was not likely anyone would attempt to thrust North into the street.

“Sir,” he said, “what is done cannot be undone; if you are here as a wedding guest, if you are here to rejoice with us in the happiness of my daughter, you are welcome.”

“Her happiness!” exclaimed Oliver.
“Gentlemen, that is an appeal which

would have waked me had I been dead, and I will pledge it as a toast if you will join me."

He snatched up a glass. His manner was strangely defiant. He felt that same stirring of the pulse, that leaping of the blood, which had thrilled him in the height of battle. There was a magnetic influence in his manner.

"Gentlemen, fill your glasses," he said, and some of the ladies in the adjoining room came to the door to see what was the occasion of so much sudden hilarity. "I pledge you to the happiness of the bride!"

"And bridegroom! Finish the toast," exclaimed old Hardwick.

"And confusion to the man who has bought her of a huckstering father," continued North, after pausing a moment during the dead silence that followed Hardwick's interruption.

A rush was made towards Oliver as he dashed the empty glass upon the ground ; but, before it was really necessary to defend himself, Hardwick's friends fell back at sight of the raised arm of Father Busby, who stood in the doorway.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a hushed, solemn voice, "restrain your ill blood, whatever may be the occasion of it. I bring you sad tidings." He went to the doorway of the next room, where several ladies had crowded to see and hear. "Pardon me, ladies. It is to spare your feelings that I close the door."

When he had shut it, he turned towards the men, who, hurried from one exciting incident to another, were sorely bewildered—a condition which was quickly changed to one of horror and amazement.

"Mr. Hardwick, calm yourself. Gentlemen, prepare yourselves for the saddest

news at a moment like this which your minds can conceive. Lord Ellerbie is dead!"

"Dead!" they exclaimed, as in one voice.

"Dead!" repeated the priest.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERY OF BRACKENBURY TOWERS.

And the ghostly light burnt clear,
By the shiv'ring willow's bed,
By the dank and lonely mere
And the sedges crimson red.

THEY held the inquest on the body of the late Lord Ellerbie in the library of Brackenbury Towers, where the old man and Hardwick had sat over many a bottle of wine, and where the amorous Earl had displayed his glistening treasures to Susan and Mary.

The silent remains of the master of the house lay in the blue bed-room, and there

the jurymen had surveyed the corpse. The twelve good men and true walked up the solid oaken stairs with a fearsome tread. They kept together as if for mutual protection. They saw a mysterious something in every corner, heard a ghostly whisper in every rustle of curtain and tapestry. For it had gone forth that the legend of the strange old family had been fulfilled, and that the last of the race had gone out of the world, a victim to some spectral executioner.

Even the Coroner himself looked upon the calm pale face, and its ghastly mark beneath the chin, with a sense of awe he had never felt before. He was a staunch Protestant. The praying priest by the bedside, the lighted candles and the tall silver cross, had in them, to his mind, something uncanny, not to say devilish.

Father Busby was the principal witness

at the inquest. He described Lord Ellerbie's entrance into the ancient chapel of the knight for contemplation and prayer. Soon afterwards the Father, waiting for him in the adjoining chapel, heard his lordship lock the outer door. He thought nothing of it at the time, except perhaps it may have crossed his mind that the Earl was more devoutly inclined than usual. After a little while, however, Father Busby knocked at the door. There was no answer. Presently he knocked again. Then an instinct of fear came over him, and he made a loud demonstration, rattling the latch and making other sounds to attract the Earl's attention. Still there was no answer. He summoned assistance. The butler and several servants came. They took counsel together, and with the aid of the woodman burst open the door. They were horrified to find the Earl lying

on his face, by the tomb where he had been kneeling. At first they thought he was in a fit. On raising him up they found that his throat had been cut and he was quite dead. Beneath him, all wet with blood, was a clasp-knife of ordinary make, but exceedingly sharp.

There was a good deal of informality about the manner in which the inquest was conducted. The evidence was taken down, but much was said that was not evidence. The Coroner seemed to permit any and all kinds of explanations to be offered touching the deceased's violent ending. The butler said he had always felt no good could come of this marriage, so far as the Earl was concerned, though a more lovely countess never bore the name of Ellerbie. "But ever sin' I've bin in this family, man and boy," he said, "I've always had a sort of inkling our lordship would be last, and it

has niver been doubted, as I can mak out, from time immemorial what would be ending of family ; and since you ask me about Honourable Mester Scruton, I always advised lordship to be kind to him and have him about the place, seeing as he was rightful successor and most like to carry on family name ; though Mester Scruton was a hare-brained sort of vagabond as seemed not cut out for being a marrying man, as they say. When news came as he was killed in the war, I said to myself as old family was doomed."

The Coroner asked him how he accounted for Lord Ellerbie's death.

" It isn't for me to pry into decrees of Heaven or Holy Church's explanations, but seems to me as lordship in fit of sorrow or under some awful impulse took his own life. Don't ask me to account for that knife, cos I niver seed it before,

gentlemen, and it's a mystery to me ; where lordship got it I cannot say."

The woodman or forester who had helped to break an entrance into the fatal chapel, said the people of Grassmoor and other parts believed there was a ghost at Brackenbury. He had never thought so until the night before the wedding. He was returning to his cottage in the woods, not far from the lake, and he saw a light flash near the old Temple, or boathouse. At first he thought it was a Will-o'-the-Wisp ; and then it occurred to him it might be poachers after the deer. "I turned to find out what it was, and I saw somebody or summat in the boathouse, and a streak of light as if they had a lantern. I just clipped my stick tight," he said, "and thinks I, 'Well, I've heard of ghosts being about, but niver see one,' so I says to myself, 'if it's a ghost I'd like to see 'um,

and if it isna ghost I'd like to see 'um all same.' And when I gets close to spot light goes out. I bangs straight in i' the dark, and I says, 'Come out of that,' I says, and there was nobody there! A bat flew again me, but that was all, and I expect I was as close on seein' a ghost as a man could well be without exactly seein' one."

Then Father Busby remembered the incident of the *prie-dieu* being moved, and he came forward and related the circumstances, whereupon all the Catholics in the room crossed themselves, and the others looked at each other as much as to say, "Nobody but a ghost could do that," for in the neighbourhood of Grassmoor and Chesterfield they were willing to credit even the simplest possible events to spiritual agency. When I was a boy ghosts without heads were supposed to be common in the meadows on dark nights,

spectres with illuminated faces peered out of dark corners at cross-roads, and unseen hands would unbolt doors and fling windows open. There were several so-called haunted houses within a radius of twenty miles round Brackenbury Towers, but no ghost had such romantic and characteristic quarters as that which Tom Bertram, in Mary Kirk's girlish days, had undertaken to meet single-handed and try conclusions with. Father Busby said he had no theory to offer in regard to the removal of the *prie-dieu*. He knew that nobody could possibly have entered the chapel, and the incident had at that time affected him curiously; it had excited a sense of apprehension which he was at the time at a loss to explain, and indeed he had sought relief from it in prayer. Was there any other possible access to the Mausoleum Chapel, where the Earl was found? None.

Could anyone have entered and left unseen by him? No; and that idea, Father Busby pointed out, was untenable, because the door was locked and bolted from within.

Sitting by the Coroner's table was a stranger, a closely-shaven, keen-looking man, who whispered to the King's official, whereupon the Coroner put several questions upon this point, touching the possibility of any person being concealed in the chapel, with the result that Father Busby gave a history of it, and showed conclusively that no access or egress could be obtained except through the door communicating with the larger chapel. The Coroner thereupon thought it best the jury should examine the place themselves, and when they were there the stranger, who was the eminent detective, or Bow-Street runner, "Dick Spelter," from London, asked the Coroner's permission to sound

the walls and floor with his stick, which he did without any apparent satisfaction to himself or to the jury. A dead, solid reply came from wall and flooring, and even from the tomb itself.

When they returned to the library, Mr. Septimus Dobbs was there. He had been so much overcome by the death of his dear, kind, noble employer that he had scarcely held up his head since the calamity. Mr. Dobbs spoke of it as a calamity, and a terrible affair, and even hinted under his breath that he hoped the jury would not bring in a verdict of *felo de se*, the bare idea of being buried at night at four cross-roads, with a stake through you, being bad enough if you happened to be a commoner, but for an earl, a member of the aristocracy, a nobleman, it could not even be thought of. Suicide might be committed when a person was in a state of temporary

insanity, and that would be the verdict he should give ; but of course it was for the jury to come to their own conclusion. Mr. Dobbs did not make these remarks openly, nor in giving his evidence did he dwell much upon the strange things which the late Earl had said of late in regard to his affairs. But the Coroner was clever enough to see that Mr. Dobbs was keeping something back, and Mr. Dobbs was glad to find the King's representative so keenly observant.

" Yes," said Dobbs, " I had noticed a great change in Lord Ellerbie's manner of late ; though he had achieved, as he said, the first wish of his heart in obtaining the consent of Miss Hardwick to become the Countess of Ellerbie, he felt a strange fear at times." In what way ? " Well, he said he had sudden fits of despondency ; and I asked him only a week ago if he allowed

that foolish tradition of the family to influence him. But I perceive that I hurt the feelings of Father Busby and others present when I say foolish, and I beg leave to withdraw the remark. I am a practical man, and don't believe in that kind of things; however, the late Earl did. Can I mention any specific words the deceased said as indicating a fit of despondency? Yes, I can. The very day when he gave me some final instructions in regard to his will and the settlements on Lady Ellerbie, he suddenly looked up at me and said, 'Dobbs, my dear old friend, I hope I may never be tempted to take my own life.' It shocked me to hear such a remark, but I pretended to treat it lightly, and said I hoped not, nor anybody else's. He sighed heavily, and said, 'Ah! Dobbs, my dear old friend, I am not the man I was.'"

The jurymen laid their heads considerably together upon this significant bit of evidence, and the Coroner was observed to take a special note. Having done so, he intimated that he would adjourn for luncheon, as they might have to sit late in the day.

During the interval Mr. Dobbs made the acquaintance of Mr. Spelter, who, though a discreet officer, was easily prevailed upon by the steward and family lawyer of the Ellerbies to explain the nature of his business in Derbyshire.

“Truth is,” said Spelter, in his quick but fragmentary manner, “came down—special affair—coaching road hereabouts a year or two ago notorious for robberies—young fellow hanged—gang intimidated by gallows—moved their quarters for a time—started business again lately.”

"Ah! a gang, you say?" observed Dobbs.

"Yes, they say a gang—Bow Street says gang—Home Office is understood to say gang—you don't say gang, eh, Mr. Dobbs?"

"I don't say anything at present," answered Dobbs.

"Just so—well, that brings me down in the country—but I am here to-day on pleasure—that is, holiday-making—not employed in this case—not at all—just looked in out of curiosity—chance of stepping into a good thing sometimes in this way—gave my card to Coroner—asked his permission—and if I can be of any service—why, there you are, you see."

Mr. Spelter, a dapper little man, with eager eyes and a keen manner generally, smiled, bowed, and waited for Dobbs to reply.

"Well," said Dobbs, in his harsh, hard voice, "well, and what are your conclusions?"

"As to what?"

"This very sad affair at Brackenbury."

"Your idea is suicide?"

"Never mind my idea."

"But that's it—suicide while of unsound mind—not himself at the time—family would prefer that?—or found dead, perhaps—it would not have been case for doctor to give certificate apoplexy?—excitement been too much for him—breaking in the door and all that disturbance—no, couldn't have been managed, eh?"

"I do not understand you, Mr. Spelter."

"No!—very sorry—no offence," said Spelter, stroking his chin, the conclusion of a clean-cut jaw.

"Not at all, sir, but you seemed to infer

that there was some desire to influence the jury."

"And isn't there?—don't you wish to make out your own verdict?"

"No."

"Don't care to suppress inquiry?"

"No; we are straight, upright, fearless men in this neighbourhood, you will find, Mr. Spelter, and we have but one object in this inquiry—to arrive at the truth."

"Is that so indeed?—glad of it—shall kill two birds with one stone—obtain permission to take this affair up."

"You have formed a theory touching the Earl's death?"

"Just so—easier business than the other—when will is read—papers examined—motive of third parties cleared up—soon spot him."

"Whom will you soon spot?"

"The murderer," said Spelter, stroking his chin.

"Murderer!" exclaimed Dobbs. "Why, heaven preserve us! you don't think my dear friend was murdered?"

"Yes, clear as daylight—plain to me as if I had seen it done."

"My dear sir, you chill my blood, and fire me with a desire for vengeance—no, that is too harsh a word, justice I should say. As the steward and legal adviser of the late Lord Ellerbie, let me retain your valuable services. I give you full power to take whatever steps you think right to clear up the mystery; pray draw upon me for your charges, and in good truth consider me your banker. I will send a letter immediately to the London police authorities and to the Government, saying that I beg them to place the matter in your hands."

"Thank you kindly—you honour me—I

shall report our interview to my chief—hold myself bound to you, sir—pleasant to meet such a gentleman—confidence great thing in our business—say nothing about me—oh! no, we never mentioned him—don't you see, sir—his name is never heard—call on you privately whenever you wish."

"To-morrow at Chesterfield; Glumangate, by the Sessions House; my offices are well known; and fifty guineas may quicken your perceptive faculties still further?"

"Not a doubt of it—plain spectacles for some—give me gold-rimmed glasses—uncommon quick sights gold rimmers sometimes—queer profession mine, sir—get our wits sharpened—come in contact with high and low—cunning ones of all kinds—clever is the word all through, from cracksman to judge that hangs him—from lawyer for

the prisoner to learned counsel who takes his life away—but there, Crowner's Court is assembling again—found dead with wound in neck, but how came by it no evidence to show—eh, Mr. Dobbs?—you'll see; but you and I will astonish them!"

"Not to-day?"

"No, not to-day, sir—must have time—like a case that takes time—work it up—come to it by degrees—play it like a salmon—that's my way."

Mr. Dobbs did not like the detective officer. His manner was cold-blooded. In the jerky style of delivering his remarks, Dobbs thought he saw an attempt to hide his real thoughts. Dobbs was so honest and straightforward himself that it irritated him to have to suspect the fairness of another. Spelter assumed a familiar manner towards him that was extremely puzzling. It was as if the man suspected him of know-

ing more about Lord Ellerbie's death than he admitted. Spelter's manner was indeed very mysterious. The fellow spoke of the Earl's murderer as if he inferred that he (Dobbs) had believed in the calamity being a murder from the first.

"By the way, Mr. Dobbs, one question," said Spelter, returning to the little room where he had left the lawyer—"we speak in confidence—close as confessor to priest—tell me one thing—what man or gentleman hereabouts will benefit most by the death of the deceased?"

Dobbs paused a moment, then rose suddenly and laid his arm on Spelter's, as if he were about to make a startling declaration. But just as suddenly his purpose seemed to give way.

"No, no," he said; "the idea is too shocking."

"Don't mind that—I can bear it."

"But, after all," said Dobbs, as if taking counsel with himself, "duty is the first consideration. Close the door, sir."

Spelter closed the door.

"The Countess had a lover; he went to the wars; he was believed to be dead; on the day of her marriage he returned—"

"Captain Oliver North," said the detective, interrupting him—"turned up at wedding—slanged the bride—wanted to fight the guests—heard of him at the Miller and his Men—Short told me—he'll benefit, will he?"

Dobbs could hardly conceal his annoyance at the cool, not to say flippant, way in which Spelter picked up his words and carried off his idea.

"Well," said the lawyer, "he may and he may not—that remains to be seen; he may marry the widow, and then—"

"I see—yes—thank you—I hear the

crier—Coroner taking his seat—shall call on you to-morrow—your servant to command, Mr. Dobbs."

The lawyer sat and pondered over Spelter and how he should capture him; for Dobbs fancied there was mischief in Spelter's plans. Spelter knew less than he pretended. Dobbs did not know that it was Spelter's first aim in taking up new business to make his employer think he knew all about it.

CHAPTER V.

MR. SPELTER MAKES THE ACQUAINTANCE OF
MR. SHORT.

2nd Clown.—But is this the law?

1st Clown.—Ay, marry is’t; crowner’s quest law.

Hamlet.

“I HAVE but few more observations to make,” the Coroner was saying to the jury when Mr. Dobbs returned into court, “but they will, I trust, commend them to your careful consideration. Dismiss from your minds all those superstitious stories which you have heard out of doors having reference to legends and

traditions as to the last of the house of Ellerbie, except in so far as you may conclude that they preyed upon the mind of the deceased so as to unhinge it and bring the deceased into a condition of weakness both of mind and body which rendered him irresponsible for his actions. It has been present in the thoughts of some of you, no doubt, the question whether the deceased met his death at the hands of an assassin, although such an explanation of the sad affair has not in any way presented itself in evidence, though I did request the chief constable of the district to bestir himself with a view to take up that ground in evidence, and it was for that reason you heard what the woodman had to say. You will, I imagine, fail, as I have done, to see anything in the story he told us about the light in the boathouse the night before the deceased was found dead.

There is no evidence of any stranger having been seen about the place, and Father Busby has told you that no person could have entered the chapel of the tomb without his seeing him ; you have his evidence of the locking of the door from within, and of the necessity of breaking in the door to get into the chapel where the deceased was found in the manner already described. Then you have the evidence of Mr. Septimus Dobbs, the steward and trusted legal adviser of the deceased, who tells you that the Earl had been despondent, troubled in his mind, and evidently bordering on a condition which might be described as temporary aberration of intellect, for he had expressed a hope that he might not be tempted to take his own life ; and it seems to me that, unless you are content with what I will designate to you as an open verdict of ‘Found dead,’

the cause of death being a wound in the neck, how obtained there is no evidence to show, the only other verdict you could find would be ‘Suicide while in an unsound state of mind.’ But it is for you to determine; my desire in presenting these points and possibilities to you is only to assist you in arriving at what I have no doubt, gentlemen, will be a wise and sound decision.”

The jurymen laid their heads together, and finally the foreman declared that they found that the deceased had come to his death through a wound in the neck, but how obtained there was no evidence to show.

They went over the business again at the Miller and his Men that evening; for many persons had assembled there during the day, coming and going between Brackenbury Towers and Grassmoor and Ches-

terfield. Since the execution of Jacob Marks, the old inn had fallen more and more out of public recognition. Old Short had never been a popular man; but since Jacob's death he had become positively odious to many, because it was thought he was unnecessarily severe in his evidence against the lad at his trial. It was no good for Short to say he was on his oath, and must therefore speak the truth, except when he discussed the matter with the particular sect of religionists with whom he worshipped once a week, some miles away at Brampton, near Chesterfield. There he was safe. He was known among his co-religionists as a severe but good man, who would sacrifice his right hand for the truth. Of late years he had given more attention to his mill than to the inn, and he was often away for several days together, attending, as he gave out, the

distant markets of York and Wakefield and Lincoln, dealing in corn and accumulating money, it was believed, for charitable purposes. *

The old inn had not been so busy for many years as it was on this evening of the inquest at Brackenbury. The bar was lighted up with quite an array of candles. Mine host of the Angel at Chesterfield, in consideration of a certain special dozen of old port which had lain in mouldy state in the old inn cellar for a dozen years, had sent Susan Jane to assist Short's housekeeper in the bar while the pressure of custom lasted, and two of his stable hands to help Short's men in the yard.

"Do I stay here all night? No, I don't stay here all night, Mr. Impudence," said Susan Jane to Dick Holmes, who had come down by a local coach to hear the news. "I go home in the master's gig. Why, I

wouldn't stay all night in this haunted ramshackle place for a guinea."

"Good deal of mischief in a guinea," chimed in Mr. Spelter—"known poor fellow hanged for a guinea—taken hot in his hand—only a guinea, and it swung him."

"Hush—sh," said Susan Jane.

"What for?—fact—knew a case where a guinea was marked and—"

"Can't you be quiet about your guinea?" said Holmes, catching hold of Spelter's arm; "don't you see Short looking at you?"

"What of that? It has nothing to do with Short—there was a young fellow once, and he had a guinea in his possession—it was—"

"Ssh, will you!" shouted Susan Jane above the din of the general noise of custom.

"Don't mind me, miss," said Short, step-

ping forward. "If the gentleman wishes to open an old wound and bring back sad memories—nay, if he would insult me, I know how to bear it."

"My dear sir," said Spelter, "you surprise me—nothing further from my thoughts—anyone who knows me would tell you—the last man to hurt another's feelings."

Susan Jane's admirer from Chesterfield dragged Spelter aside and whispered in his ear, whereupon Spelter fairly rushed upon Short, took him by the hand, apologized, condoled with him, and declared Short should tell him the sad story at bedtime, for he meant to stay there all night, and Short should see whether he had not a heart that could feel for another's woe.

Then, as the business slackened, and the guests began to drive off, or started to walk home in twos and threes, Mr. Spelter,

who had insisted upon giving Susan Jane a guinea, because she was the image of a young lady to whom he had once been engaged to be married, found himself agreeably occupied in the best corner of the bar with a capital bottle of wine and the gossip of Susan Jane.

“Know him, not I! I didn’t know him,” she said, in reference to Oliver North. “I didn’t know him when he came to the Angel first, and I didn’t know him when he went out.”

“How do you mean, miss?” asked Spelter.

“Well, you see, he came in one fellow and went out another.”

“Did he—how?”

“He came in with a beard and moustache like a billy-goat, and he went out with a face as clean as a woman’s.”

“Really, now; you surprise me.”

"Oh! you're easily surprised! He'd been travelling, I suppose; one of them as is going about now-a-days; they've been prisoners, left for dead after battles, or been sick, and they come straggling back, looking like I don't know what; and that's how he came."

"Indeed—comes dirty and bearded like the bard, as they say—goes clean and not bearded like the bard," said Spelter, smiling.

"Yes, and it was as good as a play to hear him say, 'What's them bells ringing for?' and me saying, 'A wedding,' and him saying, 'I wish 'em joy, and they shall ring for my wedding,' and me a-saying, 'I wishes you joy,'—and him not a-knowing and me not a-knowing as it was Miss Hardwick as he was engaged to all the time."

"So it was!—known many plays not half

as good—but he goes off soon after—eh, does he not?"

"He comes down looking a regular gentleman, striding out a bit military like, and I didn't know him, I only knowed as that was him when he come in after the row at the Hall and the awful news. But when he was going out he says to me, 'It seems to be a very grand wedding this,' and I says, 'I should think it was, you don't get one like it every day,' and he says, 'Who's is it?' And I answers, 'Why, don't you know? I should have thought as everybody knowed. Why, old stuck-up Hardwick's pretty wench to Lord Ellerbie.' 'What!' he shouted, and he staggered back again the door-post of the bar. 'What!' he says, 'Miss Hardwick?' 'Yes,' I says. 'Susan Hardwick?' he says. 'Yes, Susan no more,' I says, 'Countess of Ellerbie now;' and I niver seed a man

faint, but he nearly did for a minute, and I offered him some brandy. But he pulled hissen together like, and said, ‘No, thank you,’ and then out he walked, and I couldn’t help looking after him from the bar window. I seed him go across the market-place as if he was mad, pushing folks aside, and they letting him as if he had bought all the town and paid for it.”

“ Yes.”

“ It was about an hour when he comes back, and then I’d found out as it was same fellow as had come in with a beard by the coach.”

By this time Susan Jane was called for by mine host of the Angel, who had come to drive her home and pick up the last item of news at the present centre of information, the Miller and his Men.

“ No,” thought Spelter, as he sat over “a night-cap,” waiting for Short to join

him ; “ don’t see that there would be time —must get from Chesterfield to Brackenbury and back—right clever if he did—fine bold thing—no ; should say not possible—must try it myself—somebody must have seen him—no, no, Mr. Dobbs—wrong scent—that woodman was right—woodman saw him—my gentleman with the lantern —that’s the owner of the knife—left knife behind for a purpose—too cool a hand to drop it—Spelter, this business makes your fortune—mustn’t forget the other, though.”

“ Of a truth, sir,” said Short, in his dry, sanctimonious way, and with a Puritanical twang which he had cultivated for many years, “ and I feel disinclined to sit up any longer ; I am much fatigued by reason of the unusual bustle of the day.”

“ One glass. Some people like their night-caps on their heads—give it me

here," said Spelter, laying his hand on his waistcoat.

"It is comforting, and I won't say nay to one glass," said Short. "Betsy, one more, and then thou canst go to bed."

The housekeeper, a slovenly-looking person, made another glass of grog and departed.

"Your health," said Spelter—"sorry hurt your feelings—did not mean it—not heard of your trouble—pardon me—what was it?—have seen deal trouble my time."

"This world is full of trouble—but I'll not weary ye with mine."

"You cannot weary me."

"I'll e'en not put you to the test to-night," said Short, firmly, "some other time, mayhap."

"Well, I'm not the man pry into others' affairs—change the subject—seems strange queer place this Brackenbury Towers?"

"Were you there?"

"I was—fond antiquarian places—being in neighbourhood—travelling for pleasure—went over—heard of sad affair too—found them holding inquest—odd sort of business inquest—met a Mr. Dobbs—very civil."

"Yes, an upright, able lawyer, Mr. Dobbs."

"Indeed—when funeral over mean to go over the place—chapel, where sad affair occurred, very interesting—you know it?"

"Oh, yes, I am well acquainted with Brackenbury Towers."

"Ghosts, they say, about—do you believe in ghosts?"

Short looked nervously round as if one might be at his elbow.

"You do!—thought you did."

"No, sir, I do not."

"Don't? Why, you have turned pale—

curtain there at the back moved—wind, I think."

Spelter pretended to look anxiously towards a faded curtain that was drawn over the window.

"Turned pale," said Short. "I never turned pale in my life."

"Beg pardon—thought you seemed little nervous—not surprising—queer old place this—almost as ancient as Brackenbury—any secret passages about?—trap doors—openings in the wainscot?"

"No, sir, not that I am aware of," said Short.

"Plenty at Brackenbury, eh?—private staircases, underground roads—where does the passage from the boat-house lead to?"

"Never heard of it."

"Oh! thought you knew the place?"

"Yes, I do; perhaps not so well as you do."

"I know nothing of it."

"It occurred to me you might, being an antiquarian," said Short, looking into his glass of liquor.

"No—mean to, though—never in this neighbourhood before—they tell me there are many robberies on the roads hereabouts—highwaymen of unusual impudence."

"The disbanding of our troops has increased crime in all directions," replied Short; "great wars relieve the nation of scoundrels and thieves, peace brings back a fresh supply, and the new ones have been so accustomed to rob and murder that they prefer to live by the road instead of by honest labour."

"Well put—habit is second nature—every road in Europe infested with bandits—some lonely places on these Derbyshire highways—like travelling in the desert one

mile—through Rocky Mountains next—wonder not more robberies—that's my only surprise."

"Were you ever stopped on the road?"

"Once—daring fellow on fine black horse—mask on—capital rider—pistol to my head—hand on my horse's rein—alarming situation—handed him purse at once—raised his hat—rode off—he one way, me t'other."

"Shocking!" said Short, "and how alarming; you didn't show fight?"

"Not I—showed clean pair of heels, as they say—you have had similar adventures, no doubt?"

"No, thank heaven; but I do not travel by night, except in the coach."

"Coaches have been robbed often—between Chesterfield and Stonehedge, am told; but you are lucky—well, suppose we say good night, unless you feel in the

humour to tell me the story of that marked guinea."

Spelter dropped his voice, and looked straight at the host.

"Not to-night," said Short, lowering his eyes.

"Seems a sad story."

"It is."

"Oh, by the Lord!" suddenly exclaimed Spelter, "what's that?—A boy half dressed, with the face of a corpse, looked out between the curtains."

Spelter clung to Short in well-acted alarm; Short uttered a cry of terror, and trembled so that the glasses shook on the table.

"Ah! ah!" laughed Spelter. "I thought you were not afraid of ghosts! Good night!"

*When Spelter went to bed he drew a chest of drawers across the door of his chamber,

and put a brace of pistols under his pillow.

“Two birds with one stone—only one bird in sight at present—tough old bird—put salt on his tail with that ghost—had him there,” he said, instead of his prayers.

CHAPTER VI.

A DAY AT THE HOME FARM, AND A LETTER
FROM PARIS.

Green fields of England ! wheresoe'er
Across this watery waste we fare,
Your image at our hearts we bear,
Green fields of England, everywhere.

ARTHUR HUGH CLOUGH.

APRIL surely used to be a gayer, brighter, and more primrosy month when Mary Kirk was a girl than it is now.

It was true of March once upon a time the saying that it came in like a lion, but went out like a lamb. Now-a-days it seems not only to come in like a lion but to con-

tinue in like a whole menagerie of wild beasts almost up to the very month of leafy June. The weather has changed with our fashions ; but we are going back again to antique plates of beauty for our women's dresses. If we could revive the dear old springs at the same time, what a pleasant resuscitation that would be !

The sun is shining out amidst clouds that now and then pause to shower down fatness upon the earth on this April day of our history. One moment it rains, the next it is bright with dancing sunbeams. The earth seems to rejoice in the sun and the showers and the wind. That bank past which you drove to Brackenbury Towers is yellow with primroses which, for their pretty star-like heads to rest upon, have a soft background of tender mosses.

In Farmer Kirk's fields there are lambs frisking in shady corners. The wheat is

tingeing the brown fallow ridges with delicate blades of green. Young chickens are busy in the poultry-yard taking their first lesson in caution, for there are hawks hovering over the adjacent plantation. The cuckoo's call is heard, and the lark is moving to and fro in the meadows. The first of the swallows have come, and they are building under the eaves of the waggon sheds and stables. Garden seeds are being planted, and a fresh smell of newly-turned earth comes in through the open window of Kirk's bright clean house-place, where the family is at dinner an hour after noon.

Old Kirk has been doing "a bit of shooting." His operations have been against jays and weasels and other pernicious things, and his bag lies near his gun by the window. The poor jays with their beautiful plumage, it is a pity they are at enmity with the gamekeeper and

the farmer. Mary's father looked a fine, hale, hearty yeoman in his velvet shooting coat, with its innumerable pockets, and his florid waistcoat. He was sitting at the head of his table carving "the roast beef of old England," and listening, like the rest, to Mary's account of the installation of the new Countess of Ellerbie at Brackenbury Towers. Mrs. Kirk, in her flowery gown and great coarse apron, was drawing Mary out touching all manner of little details, which the children swallowed with their thick wedges of Yorkshire pudding. Old Kirk probably did not appreciate the picture; but from the chair in which he sat looking across his well-filled table he could see out at the open door a patch of garden, with budding gilliflowers and flowering currants, an old well with its bucket swinging and dripping from recent use, and over a low hedge

a stretch of meadows that ended far away in clumps of forest trees, through which Brackenbury Towers flashed its gilded vanes and glittering windows. Yet it must have had an unconsciously soothing effect on the most savage breast such a scene of rural peace, especially when for a foreground there was a happy family, and Mary Kirk, round and rosy and red-lipped, the eldest of it, sitting by her ruddy buxom mother.

“ Well, well, if it isna wonderful I’d like to know what is !” says Mrs. Kirk, cutting into a stiff rolly-polly pudding. “ She’s a right plucked un, is that Miss Hardwick, I mean my lady ; your father said as she’d niver go and live there, but winna she, I said you’ll see !”

“ And why should she not, mother ?” asks Mary ; “ it is her own ?”

“ Surely,” says Mrs. Kirk ; “ the very

thing I said to Kirk—didn't I, farmer?"

"You did, mother, that's true," says Kirk, "and I have nowt to say agin it. I'm sorry for poor owd man as died, or made away with hissen, or what not; but for choice I'd rather have Countess for a neighbour than him. I can't say I care much for her father."

"No, he goes about as if he'd a poker down his back and plums in his mouth," says Mrs. Kirk. "I'm sure it tak's me all my time to mak' out what he's talking about; and the way he 'Missus Kirk's' a body, and 'thank-you-I'll-not-take-a-seat-Mistress-Kirk,' it's enough to give one a surfeit!"

"He is pompous indeed," says Mary, "but that is not the worst, he's deceitful; he knew that Mr. North was alive all the time, and I think Susan—I must call her Susan, I can't call her my lady—believes

he kept the poor fellow's letters back."

"Nowt been heard of him since rumpus at wedding feast?" asks the farmer, watching the liquid beads dancing on the top of a horn of ale he is pouring from a brown stone jug.

"No; he seems to have left when Father Busby told them the Earl was dead; he went back to the Angel, and hired a horse to take him as far as Derby, on the way to London, it is supposed."

"A foolish young man!" says Mrs. Kirk, "the very time that he ought to have stopped: why, seems to me as matters couldna have been better ordered for him—a lovely widow and a lovely jointure all ready to his hands."

"Yes, you would have thought so," says Mary with a sigh; "but he's a very sentimental, odd sort of a man; he had rated at her so, and gone on at her father

to such an extent, that I expect he had not courage enough to stay; but we shall hear of him again, never fear."

"Trust him," says Mrs. Kirk, "if he is not quite daft! And now, children, off you go; Jack and Joey, get your faces washed, and go with Hannah to school; and, Dick, them turkeys have been and laid abroad somewhere, down in Stoney-hollow, I shouldna wonder; go and see, lad."

The children bustled out, and Mary, standing upon a stool, reached from the mantelshelf a leaden tobacco box and handed her father his pipe. The farmer filled it, and beckoned Mary to sit by him on the stool, which she did, laying her head on his knee and looking into the fire; while Mrs. Kirk cleared away the dinner things, at the same time taking her share in the conversation.

"Three weeks to-day sin they buried old lord," says the farmer. "Well, I donnat know, but somehow seems to me as he met with foul play as he never counted on, but it's not for me to argufy with jury; I donnat think I'd care to live at great house, Mary."

"Oh, I don't know, father; it's nice enough, and there's no fear when you have plenty of servants; besides, Mr. Hardwick is going to have that old ghost place—the knight's chapel—pulled down to the ground and sown with salt, he says, though what he expects to come up I don't know."

"Well," says Farmer Kirk, laughing, "there's one thing sure—he wonnat get the crop they say King George has just raised at Kew."

"What is that, father?"

"Hush, we wanna speak loud about the poor owd King, but he's been gardening,

they say, a bit at Kew, near palace there as he's so fond on ; he went out and sowed a beefsteak, they say, and he's gotten a fine crop of snails."

Farmer Kirk took his pipe out of his mouth to laugh at the latest story about the poor King, and Mrs. Kirk, while she was folding up the tablecloth ready to put it into the press that stood handy in the spacious pantry, paused to laugh also.

" Well, I am not sorry," says the farmer, " that they be going to pull that old cut-throat place down ; it's been nowt but a harbinger for boggarts as long as I can remember."

" Eh ! but that Mester Hardwick's a busy-body," Mrs. Kirk remarks.

" But Susan is glad to have it removed herself," Mary says ; " for I was there when Mr. Dobbs called to remonstrate

with her. ‘I appeal from your father to you, Countess,’ said the nasty, odious man. I hate him! He gives me the shudders almost as bad as that vile Short. You should have heard the Countess say that her father’s will was hers. Just like her—you know that, mother. Before anybody she stands up for her father as if she loved and respected him ever so much, and I know when they are gone she gives him to understand how little she values his word or his opinion.”

“But he is her father, my dear, same as farmer is yours,” says Mrs. Kirk, in a mild tone of rebuke.

“No, mother; my father wouldn’t force me into marrying a man I didn’t care for; my father couldn’t tell a lie if he tried, and old Hardwick couldn’t tell the truth, except by accident.”

"Bless thee!" says old Kirk, patting her head and laughing, "thou'rt thy mother's own lass."

"Why, farmer? What's thou say that for?" asks Mrs. Kirk.

"That's just how thou used to talk when thou wert Mary's age, and dang me! but it used to do me good to hear thee."

"And doesn't it do thee good now?"

"Sometimes, sometimes," answers Kirk, puffing away at his pipe, and winking at Mary, as much as to say, "I'm only plaguing her a bit."

"Sometimes! Well, I'm sure!" says Mrs. Kirk. "One gets owd and slighted at same time, that's way with men. Never thee get married, Mary; a lass never knows what she's gotten to put up with until she's bound hersen to a mester for life."

"I'll never marry," says Mary, "until I

meet with as good a man as the man you married, mother."

"Eh, well!" answers Mrs. Kirk, nodding aside to Mary (as much as to say, "I'm only teasing him—I'm not in earnest"), "you needna wait long nor go far, then."

"Oh, she needna, eh?" says the farmer. "Well, that's comforting to hear after five and twenty years of married life."

"Ah! go thy ways; tha knows I am but i' fun, thou silly owd man."

The farmer pretends to be very angry, and he pinches Mary's arm to prompt her to join in the gentle conspiracy. Just as Mrs. Kirk is becoming a little anxious, the doorway is darkened by the letter-carrier, who is a rare visitor at the Home Farm, and none the less welcome, though a letter in those days used to be received with as much trepidation as a

telegram excited in the first days of the electric post.

It was a fat, strange-looking packet, and had come over sea and land ; and there were four shillings and twopence to pay ; but old Kirk paid the money with cheerful alacrity, for he recognized the handwriting. The letter was from Tom Bertram. The young fellow had only written three times, or, at all events, only three epistles had arrived at the Home Farm during all the time he had been away. His mother, a bed-ridden old woman, who lived in the village of Grassmoor with her son-in-law, a small farmer who had married Tom's only sister, had received one letter ; but Tom had requested Mr. Kirk to read the others to the old woman. Tom had always been a favourite of Farmer Kirk, by whom he had indeed been treated more like a son than a friend ; and,

apart from the young fellow's devotion to Mary, Tom had quite a filial regard for the stalwart Derbyshire yeoman.

Mary's manner changed a good deal in presence of this letter from Tom. Her gaiety went. She seemed anxious. She would have left the room if the farmer had allowed her.

"Nay, come and read lad's letter, Mary," says the farmer, "there will be nowt in it to worry thee, lass ; come, we'll all sit down and read it."

"There'll be no more work done to-day, seems to me," says Mrs. Kirk ; "hadna the letter best be left till nightfall ?"

"No, nowt o' t' sort," says the farmer ; "we mun read him now ; nay, missus, come and sit thee down, I'll read it mysen. Shut door, Mary, lass."

Mary closed the door.

"And put window down ; we'll just get

round hearth, like, and see what Tom's gotten to say for hissen. Let's have another jug of ale, mother."

Mrs. Kirk filled the jug and poured out a hornfull, holding up the jug so that the amber liquor fell in a splashing column into the horn.

"There, thank you, missus; now smooth thy apron and sit thee down. Mary, lass, give me my spectacles."

Mary had anticipated this request. The farmer put on his tortoise-shell rimmed glasses, laid aside his pipe, pushed the tobacco-box from him, opened the letter, smoothed it out on the table, and began to read. Mary sat with her back to him, looking into the fire, and Mrs. Kirk brought out a half-finished stocking from a corner cupboard and began to knit. A sheep-dog that had been lying out in the back kitchen stalked in and lay down by the

fire. The old clock on the stairs could be heard solemnly beating time as the farmer commenced to read.

"Dear friend," he went on, "I hope this will find you well, though I be writing it with one eye, and one hand, for that matter; but I've gotten another hand, which it is a great comfort to have when so many poor fellows have lost their all."

"What does he mean?" asks Mrs. Kirk.

"Stop a bit and we'll come to it," answers the farmer, continuing to read. "It's surprising how much you can see with one eye—sixty thousand troops, as would done your heart good, our own British soldiers, some fresh from Canada, a-marching on plains of Saint Denis here outside of Paris, reviewed by Duke of Wellington and Kings and Generals without end; only thing as I complain of me being looker-on and not with my regi-

ment through this one eye business, though I told 'em I could see as well as iver I could with two, but I've got to be discharged, and am coming home through it, with a pension, however, and some loot in gold as I got in Spain, which our Captain let me stick to on account of a bit of hot work as I did now and then ; so it's like as I'll come and settle down and do a bit of farmin', which will seem sort of quiet after going about feightin' and marchin' as I have sin that morning you come and said good-bye, and often I've looked back to that time and thought of all of you at Home Farm and Grassmoor, which it has been a great comfort to me often and many's the time."

"Ah!" says Mrs. Kirk, turning her head to hide a tear that was trickling down her cheek.

Mary gazed steadily into the fire. She

was looking back, and, happily for her, a mist had come over those early days of her trouble. Time had rounded the sharp corners of it, and Jacob Marks had become a shadowy memory, like a half-forgotten dream.

“There was troops of all branches of service,” continued Farmer Kirk, turning over a new sheet and readjusting his spectacles, “and they went through sham battle which was sort of like Salamanca, showing movements and how it was won, and it were grandest sight as ever I see, for there was no wounded and dead after, no cries and screams for water, and no wolfs in human shape coming plundering you and perhaps stabbing you as you laid helpless out on the field when victory is lost and won, which is the awful business of fighting, dear friend, and I’ve seen as much as most with that eye as have gone,

and this as, thank God, I've left to me, else I wouldn't be writing this letter as it is so long, because I've nowt else to do, though don't take that as left-handed, one-eyed compliment."

The farmer looked round to remark that Tom was the same light-hearted chap as ever, and that he (Farmer Kirk) would rather have some fellows with only one eye than he would others with six, though why he should put his admiration for Tom into such an impossible comparison did not at the moment appear particularly clear either to Mary or her mother.

"Paris is a gay town; you can have no idea by Chesterfield what a big city is like, and especially foreign, and you'd think it quite rum to hear me a-parley-vooing, through being nursed so long about this eye and a bit of a sprain I got in my ankle on road here when we was pursuing of the

French after Waterloo, for once or twice they turned, as even worms they say will, though I niver see them do it in my experience of either farmin' or fishin'; but them Frenchmen they be good uns to feight, whatever folk may think, and women is kindness itself. I niver want to raise arm again' them any more, for I wouldna wish better friends, the women, as I said afore, being beautiful as they is good."

"He seems mainly smitten with the women," says Mrs. Kirk, taking advantage of a pause in the reading at this point. "Well, I should hardly have thought as Tom would been man to see anything in foreigners. I've always heard that they were such sluts."

The farmer looked round at Mary, who had moved her chair the better to hear what her mother was saying.

"Ah, a petticoat's a petticoat all the world over," says Kirk, "and a kind action is just as kind whether it's done by a foreigner or English. Don't you hear as they nursed him, and the like?"

"Go on, farmer," says Mrs. Kirk; "get letter finished."

"I shouldna wonder," the farmer continued, reading the letter, "as Captain Oliver North doesna get home afore me, as it turns out he wasna killed after all. Seems as he wor not long in hospital after Vitoria, where he done wonders of courage, and he's most astonishin' chap as I ever knew or shall know, and he's given command of company as was sent to Pyrenees, and he was sent to carry dispatches through dangerous country and with no escort as I hear, and he never arrived, and nowt was heard of him, except as French had took him and shot him for a spy; it

was a long time afore I writ to tell you as he was dead, hoping as I should hear summat different ; they struck his name out, our Captain tells me, at Horse Guards, and giv his commission to somebody else, considering as he was dead through not reporting of hisself ; and other day he comes in here a-marchin' with other prisoners as had been took and kep away in one of them outlandish French prisons as ought to have come in before now, and I sees him quite accidental in the street, and shouldn't have knowed him if he hadn't a-knowned me, though I had a patch on my eye and a beard on my chin, and was a-limping a bit myself ; and he that spare and scarecrow like as you'd niver a suspected him, and that ragged a old crow a-moultin' was nothing to him ; he seemed a good deal dazed like, and a bit wandering, and no wonder, shut up nigh on two year with

poor food and hard stones to sleep on, as he'd rather hav been shot, he said; and it was a day or two afore he seemed at all natural like, though he sit down and writ a long letter to her, you know who I mean, and he said as that had been his only comfort a-writing to her in prison, as he smiled happy like when he said, 'Money's a good thing, Tom, sometimes, as I happened to have a few guineas when they took me, cuss 'em, forty on 'em to one, and I giv 'em all to get letters sent to her, so as she would know I wasn't dead, and while there's life there's hope, Tom,' he said, 'and I always knowed as we should wop the enemy, leastwise you chaps would as were not in prison, and that I'd be free again some day.' Poor chap, and he says, 'Ah! Tom, I never had an idea what them French prisoners suffered in Chesterfield away from all they hold dear till I was a

captive myself ;' and I tell you what he says, just like the dear chap, 'if they have struck me out, as your Captain tells me, if they have herased my name from army list after having promoted me, why, I've had enough of what they calls glory, and they won't find me a-beggin' to be put on again.'"

"He was whole, at all events," says Mary, speaking for the first time ; "he had both eyes."

"But he doesn't seem to have made much use of 'em," remarks Mrs. Kirk.

"No," says the farmer, "it's as I said before, one eye well used, and with a good heart, is better than six."

"That wasn't what you said before, farmer," says Mrs. Kirk ; "but it comes to same thing, though head's got more to do with it than heart, I should say," a remark which, it must be confessed, did not ap-

pear to contribute much to the elucidation of the other.

"There's one thing," resumed the farmer, re-adjusting his spectacles, "Oliver North needn't want no more to do with army, he's been and invented that thing right out as he was puzzling at, and he means to fight that battle, he says, yet ; you'd hardly believe as he was a-making designs and things on a board with a bit of charcoal one night by a lamp when we was all a-getting ready for feightin' next day, some a-writing letters home, some a-praying, some a-drinkin', and some a-fettling up their weapons ; but he's a regular rum un is North, true as steel, however ; and this I fancy may be last letter as I shall write you afore you sees me ; for a good number of us convalescent and able-bodied is being drafted for old England, nigh upon thirty thousand they

says is going home, leaving about same contingent here army of occupation, and so heaven bless you and keep you well, as it leaves me at present, till I see you again, and give my duty to Mary, your kind good daughter, with what words as may seem best to you, and likewise to Mistress Kirk, and a son's love to my old mother, which you will read this letter to her, and I wish I was a better scholar than I am, though she will not miss it, and maybe if you read this to Mrs. Kirk and family likewise they will not think it so bad for One eye if they don't mak' out as it's too long by half, but if I said all as I've gotten to say I might sit here for twelve month instead of best part of three days as it's took me off and on.

“Your true friend and neighbour,

“TOM BERTRAM, Sergeant-Major.”

“And a right-down good letter too!”

exclaims the farmer, as he folds it up.
“My father sent me to school till I was twelve year old, and it would puzzle me, I know, to beat it, though I reckon myself hard to conquer at accounts and a neat letter once in a way. What does thou say, Mary?”

“A very interesting letter, father,” Mary answers; “quite as good as the one you read in the newspaper from a General.”

“I see nowt to complain of except about them foreign women; but he’ll get over that, I daresay, in time,” observes Mrs. Kirk.

“Nay, missus, that’s not worth a thowt; what we’ve got to think about will be bit of farmin’ as he wants to do, and there was no lad as framed better to mak’ a downright good farmer than Tom.”

“Well, I donnat know as that’s any business of ours, farmer; we’ve gotten our own lads to look after,” responds Mrs. Kirk.

"I shall make it *my* business, mother," says Farmer Kirk, in a tone of authority which he rarely assumed, but which none ventured to gainsay when he did assume it.

"Well, thou knows best," Mrs. Kirk answers.

"There's a farm down in the hollow, between Gravel Pits and Brackenbury, as would just suit a beginner; owd Saunders towd me as he wor thinking of giving up and going to live on his bit of money with his son and daughter at Chesterfield; it belongs to Countess of Ellerbie, rent isna much, and Tom's just man for it."

"One eye is not against a farmer, then?" Mary suggests.

"No, Mary, lass, nor again' a man; and when t'other's lost defending his country it makes that as is left as good as six."

Old Kirk would adhere to his compari-

son of one and six, as an obstinate man clings to an argument or statement which he thinks his hearers regard as untenable, and which he knows himself to be faulty.

"It doesna add to his appearance," says Mrs. Kirk.

"Oh, if that's all, I believe there is such a thing as a glass eye to be had, and I have heard so far as appearances go as they are even better than real thing itself," says the farmer.

"A glass eye is very well for a stuffed owl," says Mary, looking up at a knowing specimen of that species of the feathered tribe which stood on the mantel-shelf balancing itself on one leg.

"Oh," says the farmer, a little chagrined at the remark, "then mayhap you wonnat care to see Tom again?"

"Yes, indeed I shall; though he did not bid me good-bye!" says Mary.

"Ah, lass, that was because—well, there, we'll say nowt about it; I'm only right glad, Mary, you've got over them days, bless your heart, and I hope there's many a happy year in store for thee, lass, and him too, and him too!"

Old Kirk looked at his daughter as he repeated the last remark, and she smiled, a little sadly, and then ran into his arms and kissed him,

"Well, there's one thing, missus," he says to his wife; "we wonnat let lad come home without a bit of merrymaking like; he went in the dumps, the chap did, he shall come cheerily; he's a honour to Derbyshire, and Grassmoor Church shall bang its three owd bells in token of welcome home, anyhow; I'll just go round and see that owd mother of his and speak to bell-ringing chaps about it."

"Well, lass, what does thou think about

it?" Mrs. Kirk asks, when the farmer has gone and the door is open once more to the April sun and shower.

"I don't know, mother," says Mary.

"The lad's honest enough, and he's gotten a good heart; he's of the sort as is not hard to manage, too; and mayhap them foreign wenches was kind to him, as what woman wouldn't be to a soldier wounded in battle?" Mrs. Kirk replies.

"That is the time for kindness," says Mary; "men are poor helpless mortals in sickness."

"I have heard as a man after soldiering a year or two settles down well; it's like what sowing his wild oats is to an aristocrat," says Mrs. Kirk, "and the Countess, I've understood, had a high opinion of Tom."

"She gave him a keepsake when he went away," says Mary.

"Did she now?" rejoins Mrs. Kirk. "I never heard that before."

"Oh, yes, she did."

"Really? Well, I always liked her; she was born a lady, and would have been one to the end, whether it was with a title or not; and, after all, it is better than if he'd lost a leg, or had come home with a wooden arm and a hook."

"Yes, mother."

"They might have called him Hooky Bertram then."

"They wouldn't have dared, mother; there was no young fellow in all the country braver, or that could ride better, or who flung the hammer further, or who was more respected," says Mary, quickly.

"No, maybe not; he was rather masterful at times, and even farmer didn't like him going horse-racing."

"That was only once, mother," says Mary.

"Well, well; there's no need to be in any hurry about it," Mrs. Kirk replies.

The farmer's wife had promised him any time this two years that, if Tom returned a good, honest, true man, she would not thwart the young people if Mary should happen to encourage him to propose for her. Mrs. Kirk had one principal object in life, and that was to please her husband; and, no other competitor for Mary's hand being in the way, she was already beginning to move in Tom's favour, and she was sufficiently a woman to know that a few words apparently directed against Tom were better than praise just now.

"Hurry what, mother?"

"Oh, nothing, my dear. Tom Bertram's well enough, but there's no knowing what sort of connexions he may have formed in them foreign lands."

"I don't see that his connexions any-

where make any difference to me, mother."

"No; well there, don't be angry with me for not going mad about him like your father; for my part, I think a lass should look higher than just a young fellow in the village."

"If that is what you mean, mother, you ought to know—nobody better—that Tom Bertram is nothing to me more than a friend; he never was, and never will be."

"Very well, love, don't get cross with your mother; that sort of temper is not likely to be a comfort to your husband, whoever he may be."

"I shall never have one, mother."

"Maybe not; but I've known lasses, as said that over and over again, live to be mothers of families, and happy enough too, if there is any real happiness to be got out of such responsibilities."

CHAPTER VII.

MISCHIEF AFOOT.

Outlaw.—Vengeance and the needs of our Treasury alike demand you pause and render up your store, mayhap your liberty.

Traveller.—Nay, I am a soldier, and will not brook such rough commandment.

Outlaw.—Then have at thee, soldier!

Traveller.—Unmask thy villain's face, and give me leave to see the knave who thus dare challenge knight upon the King's highway.

Outlaw.—Tear off the mask thyself an thou canst.

Traveller.—Nay, that will I be sure, St. George befriending me. Defend thyself!

THE Miller and his Men had once more put on its customary air of quiet and picturesque decay. The Bow Street run-

ner disappeared the day after his ghost trick, put so successfully upon Short, who had been greatly discomfited at his guest's conduct, and not the less chagrined at his own. For although Short was physically brave and mentally cunning, he was, like Falstaff, a "coward on instinct," or, to be more correct, he was a living example of Hamlet's axiom, that conscience doth make cowards of us all. He would not have scrupled to take a man's life if he thought it necessary to his own safety, and he would even have done the deed for profit; yet there were times when the very thought of Jacob Marks would almost raise his grey, short-cropped hair. Spelter had struck the right note when he had conjured up that imaginary apparition of a young man pale and half dressed. Short had seen the ghost of Jacob more than once in his dreams and on dark stormy

nights, when the wind came screaming by the low arches of the sunken bridge with its legend of murder, and rattled the old casements and windows of the inn. He had long since taken the swinging sign down because it creaked and groaned and sighed so in the night that it seemed to recall to him the gallows at Derby where the innocent victim of his treachery had ended his brief life in the black shadow of a false charge.

For more than two years after Jacob Marks fell under the withering hand of perjury and the sword of the blind woman who is governed by the blind law, the North Midland roads had been tolerably free from the highway robber. There had been outrages by footpads, burglaries, and even murder in those wild parts of the Derbyshire highways, the solitude and darkness of which lent themselves to foul

and evil deeds. But from Derby to Chesterfield, and between the latter town and the wilds of Millers Dale, the roads, coaching and byway, had been fairly free from the operations of the mounted and well-equipped knights of the road, who were still, however, adding a spice of danger even to travelling by coach on many of the great thoroughfares of England.

The chief actors in the often romantic and sometimes brutally vulgar and murderous robberies on the King's highway were frequently known to each other, and had their headquarters in London, and their posts of guard and succour in lonely country places. "Mr. Pious Short," as his enemies and detractors called him, was suspected of the craft as a sly practitioner on his own individual account, but they could never "get at" him. They had thrown out baits and feelers; they had put up their horses in

his stables ; they had toasted him in his best wine ; but Short had never criminated himself, as Dobbs would put it, either by word or deed. Neither the Home Office, nor Bow Street, neither the military nor the constables, detectives, runners, nor mounted patrols, had ever got so far as a suspicion, until Spelter, engaged in the prosecution of a highway thief, had received some revelations, which cast reflections upon the inn-keeper and miller of that lonely bit of road which the coaches had left to the encroachment of grass and hedgerows, the encampment of gipsies, and the stray carts that found their way to Short's wayside inn. As for the mill, it was rarely at work now-a-days, except when there was a freshet on the gradually dwindling stream, that could not always be dammed into sufficient power to turn the moss-grown wheel. Spelter had

therefore obtained leave to explore the Derbyshire country, and, quick at seizing a scent, sometimes a wrong one, but equally impulsive rightly or wrongly, he had made up his active mind that Short was the sly thief and bold robber the penitent "Knight of the Spur" had more than hinted at ; for that unfortunate adventurer had been a guest at the inn during Jacob's arrest, and a spectator at his trial and condemnation.

Spelter's information had been, to his mind, sufficiently endorsed by that subterfuge of the ghost in the curtains. He had, therefore, gone away the next day, openly hiring a cart from Short to drive him to a point on the road where a local coach ran to Sheffield, a town he said he had a desire to see. Short had driven the stranger himself, and Spelter talked of nothing but antiquities and castles, and made himself

out to be quite an enthusiast in the matter of strange histories, legends, and ghosts. Short had given him some moral advice and topographical assistance, and had talked generally in the manner of an unsophisticated countryman, which had in nowise influenced Spelter's opinion ; while Spelter had contrived to remove from Short's mind all suspicion as to the possible character of Spelter.

It would not have surprised the Bow Street runner if Short, despite his sanctimonious professions, had suddenly turned upon him and presented a pistol at his head ; for Spelter had once had a remarkable experience of the doings of a supposed Quaker, who had for more than twenty years been a notorious " receiver " of stolen watches, rings, jewels, snuff boxes, and plate. Short reminded Spelter of that drab-coated gentleman ; though

Short was a very different person from the Quaker, whose most active propensity in crime was a miserly greed, a mad desire to accumulate money, while Short, having the miserly craze in only a small degree, was a sensualist of the worst type. Short was not a companionable ruffian ; he was a quiet, morbid, sensual wretch, who took his pleasures as he took his crime, singly, alone, hugging himself on his devilish secrecy. When he was supposed to be visiting the corn-markets of Lincoln, and Wakefield, and York, or doing business at more distant places, he would be indulging his worst propensities in London, in the worst haunts of vice, and in the gayest—one night in some filthy hovel of filthy hags, the next at one of those “midnight masks” which were features of many of the public assemblies of the time, and special attractions of dens of iniquity. Gaming in those

days was a pastime of general indulgence. Basset, ombre, tic-tac, crimp, quadrille, were among the different methods of mutual plunder indulged in at the various gaming houses, which were of every degree. Short plunged into these dissipations and into every gross bestial madness of the time that the demoralization of a long war had helped to promote and foster.

But Short would have no ally, no permanent companion, no friend in his sensual fooling and infamous doings, except such casual ally as the time and place afforded. No one knew him, nor where he lived ; he had a fresh resting-place, a different lodging, every time he visited London ; and when he had run his brutal course he would by devious routes return to the Miller and his Men and the chapel at Brampton, a demure hypocrite, chuckling

to himself on his successful deceit. The only man he feared at all was Dobbs, who possibly, from the action of some secret spring of sympathy, knew that Short wore a mask. It was in a roundabout way, through the instrumentality of Short, that Lawyer Dobbs had been entrusted with the prosecution of Jacob Marks, in consequence of which Dobbs had seen Short under trying circumstances, and had a shrewd suspicion that Short knew more about the robbery of Scruton than appeared. Possibly, if it had been the fortune of poor Jacob Marks to have had Dobbs on his side to instruct counsel for his defence, Short might have cut a sorry figure and Jacob have lived to marry Mary Kirk ; but that was not to be, and so Jacob was forced into that great army of martyrs whose judicial murders are the awful exceptions to the rule of British justice.

Now Dobbs was somewhat puzzled concerning the death of Lord Ellerbie ; for he had neither seen nor heard of Scruton for months, and the deed was the more enshrouded in mystery to him because he had practically the reason of an accessory before the act to believe in the theory of murder, and yet the evidence pointed most unmistakably to suicide. Spelter had told him that there was a secret passage from the boat-house to the chapel, and that the Somebody whom the woodman saw by the lake was the murderer. If this were so, Dobbs had no reason to doubt who had done the awful work ; and, if he was correct in his surmise, it would not be long before he heard from Scruton. Therefore it did not answer his purpose that any more stir should be made about the affair, and he was very angry when Mr. Hardwick informed him that he meant to have-

the old chapel razed to the earth. Such a proceeding must reveal the secret passage if there was one, and that would assuredly lead to fresh inquiry, and the danger in that event lay in Spelter's suggestion that the crime would be a troublesome affair for those who most benefited by it. At present the widow was best served by the Earl's death; but on her behalf it might also be argued she was the greatest loser, since the murder had deprived her of the love and protection of a husband. Moreover, not the shadow of suspicion could, by the most ingenious malice, be directed in that quarter. Dobbs had done his best to prejudice Spelter against Oliver North, and that hare-brained person had done his utmost to justify doubt by leaving Chesterfield almost as quickly and mysteriously as he had come.

The lawyer concluded, a day or two after

that on which the Kirks had last heard from Tom Bertram, to call on Short and sound him on recent occurrences. Scruton knew Short well enough, possibly, to have trusted him if his aid had been necessary in any way to help a secret coming and going to Brackenbury Towers. Spelter had also told him that he had stayed a night at the inn. Dobbs had bought Spelter; at least he believed so. He had engaged Spelter's services to clear up the mystery, and Spelter had accepted such heavy preliminary fees from Dobbs that the lawyer regarded him as his own instrument, his tool, to be used as he willed. The lawyer had particularly requested Spelter not to take any action touching his idea of having the mysterious chapel at Brackenbury partly or wholly pulled down without his (Dobbs's) consent and approval; yet before Spelter withdrew from

the neighbourhood *openly* to return to it *privately*, he had ensured the placing of an anonymous letter on the Countess of Ellerbie's dressing-table, and another on Hardwick's desk, and he had sent two others to London to a colleague who would despatch them thence in the regular mails, each of which missives urged the Countess and Hardwick to remove that superstitious temple of crime and murder and ghostly stories for ever from their otherwise unexceptionable estate. One letter contained a prediction that danger, perhaps death, to both father and daughter were involved in delay. Hardwick had not mentioned these letters to Dobbs, for secrecy was asked for by the writer, "a trusted servant of His Majesty the King," who undertook to make himself known to Hardwick when the good work should be completed. The notion of removing what was a perpetual

source of fear and wonder commended itself to Susan. She longed to shut out every recollection of its horrors, and the idea impressed itself upon Hardwick because he was not a good man, and therefore not a brave one, and because he was a proud man, and the bait of “a trusted servant of the King” caught his vanity and inspired a vague hope of some royal recognition of the work, especially as he had resolved to convert the modern chapel adjoining the mausoleum of the baleful knight into a Protestant church.

In this latter scheme Hardwick was at present thwarted by his daughter, into whose imagination the impressive and beautiful ceremonials of the Church of Rome on that eventful day of her marriage had sunk deep; while Father Busby’s earnest and authoritative words of consolation had touched her heart

and influenced her mind more than any spiritual ministration she had ever experienced ; for Susan had hitherto been somewhat of a sceptic in religious matters. In her bewilderment and sorrow—a wife and a widow in the same hour, discovering in that same hour the utter perfidy of her father, and meeting the man she loved and had mourned as dead—Susan had in imagination clung for support to the cross which Father Busby had raised before her eyes.

Never had priest found man or woman in a frame of mind more favourable for the promises and hopes of the Romish Church to work upon. There was something truthful and good and self-denying, too, in the Father's manner and words, and he had knelt down by Susan's side and prayed for her with a fervid eloquence touching her forlorn state, the agony of her heart torn by so many con-

tending emotions, and asking for help and guidance in that high and novel position in which she now found herself, wherein wealth and high station brought with them new duties, new responsibilities, and a new stewardship which had its account with God and His saints.

Hardwick had met with an unexpected check when Susan informed him that at present it was her intention to maintain Father Busby and his ministrations—and even possibly to extend their operations, the which she considered, apart from other influences, a duty she owed to her dead lord. In face of this triumph of his eloquence and prayer, Father Busby had raised no objection to the Countess's decision in regard to the ancient chapel and tomb, only asking that a memorial might be set up on the spot recording the history of it, and dedicated to the memory of the

last of the Ellerbies, a wish that met with prompt approval from the Countess.

It was in the twilight when Dobbs called at the Miller and his Men. The house was partially closed. The mill was silent, and had been for many weeks. The dam was low, and a green film was upon the face of the water. A narrow, gurgling stream flowed under the wheel and slipped away through the meadows, as if it crept as long as it was on Short's domain, and leapt with joy when it left his boundaries behind; for by-and-by it chattered merrily over stones and sang lullaby strains to forget-me-nots and water-daisies.

"Nobody at home?" said Dobbs, after banging at the door for some time and being admitted by the slipshod woman who had charge of the house.

"No, sir. What is your bidding?" she asked. "We have little or no custom now,

though we have liquor for them who calls."

"Well, well, where is the master?"
Dobbs asked.

"He is gone to York this very day; he
mun travel far afield that makes an honest
living in these times, I reckon," said the
dame.

"Yes, that's true; and when comes he
back again?"

"Eh, dear, that's more than I can tell ye;
not in a fortnight, maybe, or three weeks."

"Ha! So! And are ye left here by
yourself in this lonesome place?"

"I am not always by mysen; there's my
son, who takes care of the mill."

"But the mill's doing nothing, I see?"

"No, the lad's at work in the fields at
Grassmoor just at present."

"Oh, well, then you shall give me a mug
of old ale, and I'll hope to be luckier next
time I call, and ye'll tell the master I was
here."

"That I will," she answered, shambling into the cellar to draw the ale.

"As queer cut-throat a place as the devil himself could wish to see," said Dobbs to himself, looking round the murky bar with its few red cinders smouldering in the grate, and its years of dirt on the panes of the old window; "and the place has a fusty smell," he added, taking a long, reflective pinch of snuff; "hard to realise the days when it was a flourishing coaching house. Progress has gone beyond it, just as Protestantism has left road-side crosses behind it; Short is clever enough to apply this loneliness to his own purpose, shouldn't wonder; sly old fox, Short, not the man to criminate himself—Short thinks twice before he speaks once. Well, life's a game in which you should let nobody see your hand. Short plays his own game; so do I, so do I."

Dobbs chuckled, took another pinch of

snuff, quaffed the ale the woman brought him, untied his horse at the door, and cantered quietly back again to Chesterfield.

Short was all the time sitting on a corn-bin in his stable, with the door fastened from within. His black sturdy cob had ten times more mettle in her composition than anybody dreamed of when Short rode her soberly to Chesterfield market or drove her in his cart. “Daisy,” as he called the mare, appeared to be as mild as her name would seem to imply on occasion, and had a trick of stumbling now and then in answer to a peculiar jerk of the rein. If “Daisy” had been humanly endowed, and had entered into a conspiracy with her master, she could not have been more docile to the highwayman’s purposes; for not the freshest and best bred bit of horse-flesh in England could out-maneuvre or out-gallop “Daisy” when she was on active service.

While Dobbs was taking his ale in the Miller and his Men bar, “Daisy” was taking hers in the stable. She had her head in a bucket, and the liquor was old ale. Daisy knew what it meant as well as if Short had said, “Now, my beauty, it’s business to-night; not done much lately, too dangerous; but we want guineas, Daisy, not marked ones this time; and they are coming, I believe, our way before it’s dark.” Daisy drinks and pricks up her ears.

“Yes,” says Short, in a whisper, “same horse that stopped ten minutes since; it’s going now, pulled up to let his rider drink —first customer we’ve had for a week. All right, my hearty, mop it up.”

Daisy finishes the liquor and lifts her head up to be harnessed. Short strokes her neck and feels her hocks. She grips his shoulder with her teeth, and he feels the hot breath from her nostrils on his cheek.

Short is a new man. He stands erect, straight as a willow. His hand is cool and his pulse steady. He moves about with the nimbleness of youth. He puts the bit into Daisy's mouth, and fondles her ears the while; he fixes the girth and adjusts crupper and martingale with scrupulous precision.

"Ssh, steady, Daisy," he whispers; "it's a long ride to-night; our work's close at hand, but we'll not draw rein till we get to Derby, when it's done; a good feed and clean straw at Derby, and in such time after the work is done that we can step into the best inn on our way to York and prove an *alibi* if necessary; ssh!"

He took from the pocket of his brown yeoman's coat a pair of steel-barrelled pistols and put them into the holsters in front of the saddle.

"Not yet, my beauty," he whispered,

"and you must e'en be cool and wary ; it's a soldier we tackle this time, and it's a grudge we owe, Daisy, as well as the gold we want. Dost thou remember Mr. Thomas Bertram ? Well, he had the audacity to tell me to my teeth that it was I who robbed Philip Scruton—I, Daisy !—I who gave my evidence in the court ! Ssh ; so ho, my lassie."

The highwayman laid his head against the horse's neck.

"That fool Kirk has received a private message from the guard of the London mail that Bertram will mayhap come to Grassmoor by the end of the week ; but Mr. Sergeant-Major Bertram tipped the guard, and ordered him to have horse ready saddled at Angel when Wednesday's coach arrived, so that he could give Grassmoor and Farmer a surprise. Ssh ! Gossiping chap, our friend the merry guard ; he's given us

many a piece of valuable information, eh ? And we've been good to him, Daisy ; many is the guinea he's had from us. If Tom Bertram had not 'listed for a soldier when he did, just through old Kirk's silly wench not liking him as well as Marks, he'd have been a trouble to us, Daisy, a sore trouble. Mightn't be a bad night's work to settle him altogether ; he's sure to be a bother, coming home here for good, damn him !—sure to be meddling going on with him and Kirk, who scowls at me whenever I meet him, and his silly wench goes off into a faint at sight of me, curse her, and all of them ! Ssh ! So ho, my beauty ! In five minutes we'll start ; no moon to-night ; wind's been against the coach to-day, be a bit late ; we'll nick him not far from the bridge, the old place ; don't move if there's any firing till I give you the office, and then away you go short cut

over the meadows for the high-road. The French have put one eye out, they tell me, it's a pity he should be odd-eyed! Ssh! now, my dear, steady!"

He took from his pocket a velvet mask with a black lace fringe to fall over the mouth. He tied it on. Over it he put his usual hat, and he wore his customary dress, with the exception of a pair of jack-boots. A cloak was rolled up and crossed in front of the saddle.

"Ssh, now, steady, time's up!" he said, going to the stable door and undoing the bolts with a firm, cool hand. Daisy turned and followed him.

He opened the door, put out his head and listened; then pushed back the door wide and went into the yard. Daisy still followed him, and did so as gently as a pet lamb might have done.

The twilight had changed into darkness,

pitchy darkness, which increased in density every moment.

"Come," he whispered, leading the way over the soft muddy part of the yard, and through a gate into a meadow by the mill.

Daisy was by his side.

"That's right!" he said. "Now!"

The next moment he had vaulted into the saddle, and Daisy was making a well-known circuit—the same "short cut" she had made when returning from the encounter with Lord Ellerbie's postillions and the drunken heir. There were two bits of watercourse in the route, and Daisy walked steadily down the middle of the stream for some distance to avoid leaving behind her anything like a trail that might be attractive or useful to any inquiring mind such as that which belonged to persons of the Spelter class.

Far away in the distance lights shone here and there in cottage windows, twinkling like stars, but no other glimmer appeared right or left or in front of them. Startled birds at roost flew out of the hedges as they passed ; and a sheep bleated here and there as Daisy brushed by the sleeping flocks.

Meanwhile the coach had pulled up at the Angel yard, and a stranger in the King's uniform had paid his fee and mounted the horse that had been standing ready for him, and had cantered through the market-place with its blinking candles in its bow-windowed shops ; into Vicar's Lane, and past the old house where the military parson had parted with his wilful son ; down St. Mary's Gate, where that marriage procession had excited the cynical criticism of Nannie Lomas ; past the Hall in Lordsmill Street, which was

dark and had all its blinds down, for Hardwick's daughter was a Countess now, and lived at Brackenbury Towers with her father; along the street where he had marched with the colours in his hat alongside of Oliver North and the Honourable Philip Scruton, with that bracelet of Mary Kirk's riveted upon his arm; past the Horns public-house where Oliver North had stood up and asked for the King's shilling; and, breaking into a lively trot beyond Hasland Hill, towards the spot where he was expected by as dangerous a foe as any he had met in Spain or on the plains of Waterloo.

"Ssh!" says Short, leaning his head forward over Daisy's neck, while she stands motionless as a statue in a bend of the road. "He's coming!"

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.



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